

Come Rain



Jai Nimbkar

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Moonlight touched with milky iridescence the coconut fronds framed by the bedroom window. They looked unreal, Ann thought. Lying on the unfamiliar hard bed under a rough heavy blanket, she told herself, I am finally here, I am in India. But she felt nothing, neither elation nor disappointment. She thought, it's unnatural to fly thousands of miles in the space of a few hours. It seemed hard to believe that in the place which she used to call home only a short while ago, it was now broad daylight.

She began to experience the sweet languor one feels when a very tired body begins to relax. Then a fresh burst of laughter from downstairs assailed her ears and fuelled her anger. Her eyes felt strained and gritty but she refused them the comfort of sleep.

Finally--she didn't know how long after she had come up -- there were footsteps, voices, coming closer, then the door opened and Ravi came in.

He said casually, 'You still awake?'

The casualness of his tone was the final insult.

She said, 'How could you expect anyone to sleep through all the racket?'

He said mildly, 'We weren't that noisy, were we?'

She said nothing.

'Well, I am sorry if we kept you awake. You can sleep now.'

'How could you tear yourself away from them so soon?'

He was astonished at her vehemence. 'Ann, you are not going to act the neglected wife because I spent a few hours with my family, are you?'

She couldn't believe that he was actually dismissing her legitimate grievance as an inconsequential and irrational wifely gripe.

'I guess they wouldn't have felt you were spending time with them if you hadn't left me out of it '

'I didn't ask you to get up in a huff and go off to bed.'

'You certainly did as clearly as you could without saying it in so many words.'

'You are being ridiculous. If you felt left out it was your own fault. Was anybody stopping you from taking part in the conversation?'

'Yes, by insisting on talking only in Marathi.'

'They are not fluent in English, Ann. It would have been difficult for us to really talk to each other.'

'There you are. You just admitted that nobody talked to me. So what was the point in my continuing to sit there? Also what's the point in my staying here at all? I might as well move to a hotel.'

'Don't be absurd.'

'I am not being absurd. You say none of the others can speak good enough English. It's not true, but let's agree that it's true. What about you? How do you justify the fact that you hardly spoke to me at all the whole day? And then didn't even come to bed with me?'

'I wasn't sleepy.'

'Sleep has nothing to do with it.'

'I thought you go to bed to sleep.'

'You are being intentionally obtuse. Damn you, didn't you feel like spending some time with me on our first day here? Didn't it occur to you that I might want to share my first impressions with you, ask you about things, that I might simply be lonely, homesick? Ah, shit.'

The last remark was directed at herself because she had started crying. She didn't know whether her tears were from anger or misery. She preferred to think anger, because she felt contempt for women who used tears to express self-pity, or to resolve an impasse. But her tears succeeded in doing just that.

Ravi put his arms around her and said, 'Don't cry darling. I am sorry. I didn't mean to make you feel bad. You know I didn't.'

Slowly he started caressing her, kissing her, until she felt herself melting against him. But even as they made love Ann thought, this is the first time we are making love here. It should have been something different, something special.

He kissed her and said, 'Goodnight, Ann, sleep well. You'll see, after a good night's sleep things won't seem so bad.'

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She fell asleep quickly and when she opened her eyes the sun was streaming in from the window. She reached for her watch and saw that it was past eight o'clock. She lay there trying to identify and assimilate the unfamiliar sounds. A bird call, a radio blaring music, voices talking in strange cadences, and rudely bursting out of the general hubbub, the screeching whirr of the autorickshaw engines and the plaintive appeal of their horns.

She shifted on the bed and her eye fell on a wall calendar with only one month left in it. It sported a blue alpine scene. Or perhaps a Himalayan scene. She remembered Ravi telling her mother, 'I get so mad when people talk about the heat in India. There are places there where it gets colder than you can ever imagine here in the bay area.'

Other than the one calendar there were no decorations on the walls which were covered with pale blue oil paint, too shiny and with hairline cracks in it. The beds in which she and Ravi slept were lovely old four-posters, but scratched and dull, badly in need of polish. The half-curtains in the windows were made of cheap-looking printed cotton, but the small carpet between the beds looked expensive. Nothing was of a piece, and obviously nobody had made a conscious effort to decorate the house in any particular style or with any particular taste. Ann knew that this was not due to lack of money, because last night's dinner, in honour of the return of the prodigal son, had been served on solid silver plates.

She looked over at Ravi, sleeping peacefully on his back, his mouth slightly open, his blanket pulled up to his chin, his long black eyelashes curling close to his cheeks. He looked very vulnerable and she felt a little guilty. The crisp December morning had lifted the sense of being banished into a dark world, the sense almost of disaster, which she had felt the night before, and she wondered if her reaction had indeed been excessive.

During the flight she had asked him, 'Are you terribly excited that you are going to meet your family very soon? You haven't seen them in what, seven years?'

He had answered morosely, 'I don't know, Ann, I've been away so long, I won't know what to say to them.'

'Don't be silly, of course you'll know what to say to them.'

His nervousness had reassured her, however, because it

ranged them together against whatever awaited them. But her feeling was short-lived. He had needed only the immediacy of their presence to realize that they were, after all, his family, and with them he could pick up where he had left off. He had allowed himself to be swallowed up by them, shortly to become indistinguishable from them, laughing too much, talking loudly in a language of which the extent of her knowledge was a few painstakingly learned words and phrases. He had with ease made the transition into a world to which she had as yet no access.

No, she decided. Her reaction had not been excessive. Yet this morning no trace remained of the panic she had felt. On the contrary she felt rising within her the excitement of being in a strange land, where everything waited to be explored and assimilated.

She got up and wandered over to the window which overlooked the front garden and the street beyond. It was not much of a garden, a few flowering shrubs, half a dozen trees, an untrimmed hedge, the coconut palm which she had seen through the window last night. Uma, Ravi's brother's wife, was picking jasmine in a corner of the garden. Her little daughter was helping her, chattering in her high sweet child's voice. Uma was plump, almost overweight, but there was a slow grace about her, a kind of lazy rhythm in the way she moved, her long plaited hair moving sideways with each step, slapping gently against one buttock and then the other. She had not talked much to Ann. In fact she did not talk much to anyone. Ann wondered what she thought behind the placid friendly face, what they all thought. Was it a strange and terrible thing for them to have an outsider, a foreigner, become a member of their family? Well, she thought, turning away from the window, they will just have to learn to live with it.

Ravi showed no signs of waking up and she went over to his bed and kissed him. He opened his eyes and smiled at her sleepily, holding out his arms.

She said, 'Twin beds along opposite walls are not conducive to spontaneity in the conjugal relationship.'

'Why are you making complicated statements so early in the morning?'

'Getting together has to be a conscious act of will.'

'That's the best kind of getting together.' He pulled her down on the bed. 'Let's perform a conscious act of will.'

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'Not now, Ravi. I want to have a bath.'

'You want me to give you a bath?'

'You wouldn't dare.'

He didn't deny it. 'Don't you want to come down and have tea first?'

'No, I feel so dirty I couldn't face anyone until I've had a bath. I would have had one last night but the water was cold and I wasn't sure what to do anyway.'

'You poor pet. Come, I'll educate you in the intricacies of the bucket bath.'

He was relieved that the quarrel of the night had been forgotten. That was one of the nice things about her. She didn't carry grudges from one day to the next and accumulate them.

After the rather unsatisfactory bath—no matter how much water she poured over herself, she didn't feel that she had rinsed off all the soap—Ann went down to an unsatisfactory cup of tea. It was too strong, too milky, too sweet. She was dismayed at the absence of breakfast. The night before she had found the food too hot and not felt like eating very much of it, and she was now ravenous.

Ravi's father looked up from his paper and asked her how she had slept. She said very well. He said good, and went back to his paper. He was an imposing looking man, tall and heavy, with a long straight nose, prominent, slightly protruding eyes and a skin as dark as mahogany but without its sheen. His voice was that of a man used to command and his manner that of one used to arranging and directing the lives of those around him. He carried his authority easily and its exercise was casual and relaxed, as though he did not expect opposition.

He asked Ravi, 'What's your programme now?'

'Nothing special.'

'Why don't you take the car and show Ann something of Sangampur?'

Ravi's mother spoke up suddenly, 'I have some shopping to do, so I'll need the car in the morning.'

'Then you can take Ann with you.'

Ann quickly said, 'I'd prefer to walk. You get to see a place much better that way.'

She didn't want to go with her mother-in-law, and she was sure that her mother-in-law had no wish to take her. The day before she had watched with curiosity this woman who, despite

her shortness and plumpness, managed to look patrician. Ann had felt the cold scrutiny of those gray-green eyes, the complete absence of welcoming warmth, and recognized an enemy. She had not, like the others, been at the airport to receive them. When they arrived at Sangampur she was waiting for them at the top of the short flight of steps which led into the house. She put vermillion on Ravi's forehead and waved a lamp around in front of him. Then she handed to her daughter the plate on which the lamp was and finally embraced Ravi. Ann saw that her eyes were full of tears. Ravi took Ann's hand and said, 'Aai, this is your daughter-in-law.' He sounded like someone who takes shelter behind a false heartiness, hoping to be forgiven some trespass. Ann folded her hands in greeting and said, 'Namaskar.' Ravi's mother merely nodded, gave Ann a long, openly appraising look, and then said something to Ravi. While unpacking in their room later, Ann asked him what she had said but he had been evasive. 'Oh nothing that can be translated exactly. She said something like, so you are finally back.' Ann knew he was lying, because she had seen the slightly shocked expression on the face of Ravi's sister Mohini, and the quick look the girl had darted at her, trying to gauge if she had understood.

'What shall I wear?' Ann asked when they were getting ready to go out.

'What's wrong with what you've got on?'

'I just wondered what would be most appropriate.'

'You can wear anything you please, Ann. People don't worry about such things.'

She was wearing a pleated brown skirt and a sleeveless yellow blouse, and had wondered whether it might be too bright and conspicuous. She considered tying up her shoulder-length hair but finally left it loose.

As they walked out the gate Ravi said, 'What do you want to see?'

'How should I know? You are the native of this place. I want to see whatever you want to show me.'

'The trouble is, there's nothing here really worth showing. No parks or museums or beautiful buildings. It's nothing like an American city.'

'Darling, if Sangampur were a copy of an American city, I would find it very boring.'

They walked around the neighbourhood and Ann said, 'Have you always lived here?'

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'Yes. Appa built this house a few years before I was born. This was considered a rather exclusive residential area then. I guess it still is. It hasn't run down as much as some others. Most of the houses are owned by one person but now many are partly rented out. Still it's not like a row of apartment houses. It's still a pleasant neighbourhood. Each house has a small plot and a few trees, and the streets are still comparatively free of the mad traffic of the main roads.'

They wandered farther and Ravi showed her his school and college, the cinema theatre where he and his friends saw an occasional English matinee by cutting classes, the lending library from which he borrowed books and the Irani cafe where he and his friends decided the fate of the world over a cup of tea while watching self-conscious girls walk by

Ann drank it all in avidly. It supplied a background to Ravi which she could never have imagined, because ultimately imagination can only draw on experience, and this was all so completely outside her experience. Now she felt that her perception of him was being rounded out. She felt very happy to be sharing all this with him. She linked her hand with his. He looked at her, surprised, pressed her hand and then let go of it. He wondered whether she had not noticed that other couples didn't walk hand-in-hand.

He said, 'So what do you think of it all?'

'It's just so exciting. I mean, you sort of build up a picture in your mind, from things you have heard, read. And then you get there and it's nothing like the picture.'

'The reality is much worse, you mean.'

'That's not what I mean at all. It's just different, better actually than anything I had imagined. Your mental pictures always tend to get a bit over-simplified, have you noticed? Reality is so much more complex and exciting.'

'You can't tell me that you find the crowds, the noise, the dirt and shabbiness exciting, Ann. God, one forgets what it's like, how bad it is.'

'Why, I believe you are suffering from culture shock!'

'You are damned right I am. And I don't see why you find that so amusing. If you aren't suffering from culture shock, it's only because you are looking at everything as a tourist, an outsider. It's different for me. It's my country. I feel responsible.'

He looked quite depressed. Ann thought that probably he

was right. If you were looking at something familiar, you were more likely to be affected by the depressing aspects than charmed by the novelty of it.

She said, 'Do you know some place where we can get something to eat? I am ravenous.'

'Of course. You know, now that you mention it, I am hungry too.'

He flagged down a rickshaw and it crossed the street in a tight U-turn and stopped by them.

Ann said, 'Oh, I've been wanting to ride in one of these.'

'Hold on to the strap if you value your life,' Ravi warned.

Five minutes later when they got out of the rickshaw, Ann was laughing and trying to smooth her hair which had been blown about mercilessly.

'I think it's terrific. Almost beats the roller coaster.'

'I am glad you found it exciting,' Ravi said tartly. 'I was afraid for my life. These guys have no respect for traffic rules or their passengers' safety.'

They went into the restaurant called Amrapali, Ravi told her, after a famous old court dancer.

'How utterly romantic!' Ann said, conjuring up a beautiful dancer in gorgeous clothes moving sinuously for the entertainment of a king's court.

Ravi said, 'My god, this place has really run down. That's the trouble with everything in this country. People never maintain things.'

'Never mind. I am so hungry I am beyond noticing my surroundings.'

Across the table he looked at her long windblown hair, the pink in her cheeks and the sparkle of excitement in her eyes. He felt like a sour-faced grouch. He loved her capacity to enjoy every experience to the fullest, without reservations. This was to his mind the essence of what was admirable in the American character.

He covered her hand on the table with his, briefly.

'What was that for?' she said.

'I love you. You are wonderful. I thought after one day here you would run to catch the first flight home. But here you are, actually enjoying yourself.'

'Aren't you?'

'I guess so.'

He turned to the waiter to give the order.

2

Sangampur received its name from the confluence of the rivers Sarsa and Kanheri. At one time the rivers used to contain the expanse of the town. At one time too, the town was laid out according to a plan. But whatever structural and functional unity it once had, had long since vanished. From the original rather prim nucleus Sangampur had sprawled in an unplanned manner like a person whose accumulation of fat gets out of hand. Its growth was limited on the south and west only by the existence of a range of mountains, part of the foothills of the Western Ghats. The industrial estates at first tacked on as small suburbs towards the east and north had now grown into enormous complexes. They had brought crowding, pollution, noise as well as wealth. Early morning, the industrial smoke and the exhaust fumes of vehicles laid a pall on the city which lifted only with the strong rays of the afternoon sun, to descend again immediately after sunset. The life of the city throbbed on unheedful of the clucking of the environmentalists and the nostalgia of the old-timers for the charming quiet town Sangampur once was.

Ravi found nothing charming about Sangampur, and whatever nostalgia he may have felt for the childhood and adolescence spent in the city had long been replaced by contempt and embarrassment when he compared it to any of the American cities he had seen. Now it was simply a city of crowds, noise, filth without any redeeming feature. He wondered what to think of the people who condemned themselves to living in such an environment without lifting a finger to improve it.

Ann on the other hand found everything fascinating, perhaps most of all the surprises the city sprang on the explorer.

'Now look at this,' she said. 'Who would expect this quiet island flanked by two noisy streets?'

They were in an unexpectedly old-world residential area with cool shady trees surrounding old cottages fronted with wooden trellis work and ornate double-storeyed stucco apartment houses with unlikely names like Marian Mansion on streets called Convent Street and Dwyer Lane.

'The names seem unlikely,' Ravi said, 'only because you don't know the history of the place. This used to be the British army headquarters for the region. Naturally it has still kept some imprint of the time when the British lived here.'

'I would love to read the history of the city.'

'I doubt whether anything of the sort exists, but we'll look for it.'

'Oh look Ravi, just look at the name on that shop.'

The sign said, 'Watergate Wines.' Ann wanted to go in and ask the man whether an ironical reference to the notorious Watergate was intended.

'Ann, you can't just go in and ask people you don't know a question like that.'

'Why not?'

'Because this is not America. People don't do that sort of thing here. In any case it's highly unlikely that this has anything to do with that Watergate. The man won't know what you are talking about.'

Ravi thought that Ann's exuberance which seemed natural in America was out of place in India. He wondered why she didn't see this. Each culture has its appropriate demeanour and behaviour and it did not make sense, for anybody who was not merely a visitor, to be conspicuously different.

There was an Udupi coffee house nearby and Ravi said, 'Let's go have some coffee and something to eat.'

They were settling themselves at a table when they heard someone call out Ravi's name and looking up, saw two men approaching their table.

'Shri! And Vijoo,' Ravi said. 'Imagine running into you. Sit down and join us.'

Vijoo said, 'I say Ravi, we thought you were still across the seven seas and here you are back already and you haven't even let your old friends know.'

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'I've only been back a couple of weeks. Meet my wife. Ann, this is Vijoo, and Shri. We were in college together. Shri, I would have recognized you anywhere. You haven't changed a bit.'

'Neither have you,' Shri said. He was a slight dark man with heavily oiled curly black hair, and quite regular features. Ann thought he looked so much like dozens of other Indian men that she would not be able to pick him out of a crowd.

Vijoo was fairer, heavier, with receding hair and a pronounced paunch which he now patted ruefully but at the same time with the smugness of a man who was well-settled in life and didn't need to worry about his physical appearance. He said, 'I am afraid I can't claim not to have changed.'

'What will you have, coffee? Shri? Something to eat?'

'Just coffee for me,' Shri said.

'Same for me.'

'Ann?'

'I would like a masala dosa and coffee.'

Shri said, 'You like the food here?'

'I like some of it. I love dosas.'

Ravi said, 'What are you doing these days, Shri?'

'Teaching in the old college.'

'I thought you were going back to your village to start a school there.'

'You can't always do the things you dream about. Oh eventually I hope to go back, but for now it's more important to earn money. I have a family to support.'

'Are you married?'

'Oh no,' Shri smiled. 'Can't afford it.'

'He is a disciple of Ramdas Swami,' Vijoo said.

'What about you?'

'Of course I am married. You can't expect an eminently eligible man like me to remain unmarried for very long, can you?' He giggled.

Ravi smiled fleetingly, thinking, same old Vijoo, with his collegiate humour. 'What are you doing?' he asked.

'I work for Rawal Glass Company. We make bottles of all shapes and sizes. Also laboratory glassware.'

'What exactly do you do?'

'I am on the sales side.' He added defensively, 'It's a job. These days with the educated unemployment so high you can't

afford to be choosy.' Ravi gathered that he was not very high up in the company hierarchy.

In the pause that ensued Shri turned to Ann and said, 'How do you like it here?'

Even though it was the question everybody asked her within minutes of meeting her, she appreciated Shri's making an effort to talk to her. She had found that a lot of people thought it unnecessary to talk to her. To them she was not a person to be explored, understood, responded to, but only an adjunct to Ravi, to be looked at, sized up and then relegated to the background. She was particularly irritated when someone talked to Ravi about her as though she was not there at all, the way you might discuss a small child in its presence.

'I like it very much,' she said.

'You must find a lot of things difficult to adjust to.'

'I do indeed,' she smiled. 'But I manage.'

'Have you seen anything of the town?'

'A little.'

'A little!' Ravi said. 'She is a fiend for sight-seeing. And the dirtier and more congested the place, the better she likes it.'

'Those are the most interesting places,' Ann said. 'I love all the old houses and the little lanes and all the shops much better than the modern parts of the town.'

'You are right,' Shri said. 'All the same, I can understand what Ravi feels. It's only natural not to want to expose the worst side of your country to an outsider.'

'I am not an outsider, strictly speaking.'

'Still, you are a newcomer. And you are bound to compare what you see here with your country. I am sure your cities are not as dirty as ours.'

'Oh we have our own kind of dirt. Less obvious maybe, but there. Like automobile exhaust, chemical pollution.'

Ravi said, 'And you are implying that we don't have that kind of dirt? What is this you are breathing? Pure natural air? Listen, in America they are at least aware of the dangers of pollution, they are trying to do something about it. We merrily let our chemical pollutants into the air and our sewage into the water and don't even know that it can do harm.'

'Ah,' Vijoo said, 'now we are on the fashionable topic of the day.' He turned to Ann. 'Talk endlessly but do nothing, that's the Indian way.' He looked at his watch. 'Well, even if you are

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on your honeymoon, Ravi, I've got to get back to work. Look, how about a get-together sometime? Bاندoo is around, and Amol is also here looking after his family shop. We'll meet and talk over old times.'

'I'd like that,' Ravi said guardedly.

'How about this evening?' When he saw Ravi hesitate he said in Marathi, 'Or will you have to ask for Memsahab's permission?'

'What time?' Ravi said, sensing that there was now no way out.

'About seven? Come to my house.'

'You live in the same place?'

'Same old place.'

After they had left Ravi said, 'You don't mind my going, do you?'

'Of course not, Ravi,' she said, surprised.

'I am not really keen on going. I don't believe in such get-togethers.'

'Whyever not?'

'Because after so many years I probably have nothing in common with them.'

'That's what you said about your family, and you turned out to be wrong.'

But almost from the moment he reached Bاندoo's room, Ravi knew that he was going to be proved right. Apparently there was some misunderstanding about when they were to meet, and Ravi and Vijoo arrived at Bاندoo's place to find themselves half an hour late.

Bاندoo said, 'Hey, what happened? We were about to give up on you.'

'Ravi couldn't tear himself away from home, you know.' Vijoo gave a meaningful smirk, and Ravi's protests that he had reached Vijoo's house at the exact time he was supposed to, were drowned in his friends' laughter. Their merriment set his teeth on edge. He thought that they had never outgrown their adolescent attitudes towards marriage, women, life.

He said, 'What are you doing these days, Bاندoo?'

'I am a clerk in the accounts division of the State Transport. What more can poor clods like me expect without the benefit of a foreign education?'

He did not say it with obvious rancour, but the barb was there.

He had been an indifferent student whereas Ravi had an excellent academic record. Although Ravi's father had enough money to send him abroad, he had done it on his own by getting a scholarship. However, he let Bando's remark pass. He looked around the bare room, obviously a bachelor's quarters, and said, 'You are not married yet?'

'No.'

'How come?'

Vijoo said, 'He hasn't found the *Apsara* he is looking for.'

'He is too choosy,' Amol said. 'I keep telling him that he is not getting any younger and pretty soon he won't get offers from anyone except the leftovers.'

They all laughed. Ravi said, 'I don't think I could make up my mind about a girl after seeing her just once for a few minutes. It seems an extremely haphazard way of getting married.'

'No more haphazard,' Amol said, 'than what you call a love marriage. In fact less so, because this way you are more likely to find a girl who fits in with your background, your family.'

'Whether you can get along with her is more important, and you can't possibly determine that by taking one look at the girl.'

Vijoo said, 'It is important for the girl to get along with your family too. Even if you don't live with your family, you don't give them up altogether when you marry.'

'At least in our country you don't,' Amol said. 'So it's a mistake to marry a girl from a very different background just because you think you love her.'

Ravi said angrily, 'Are you going to tell me that in all your arranged marriages, all the girls get along beautifully with their in-laws?'

'Maybe all of them don't. But at least they know what is expected of them. They are taught to make the necessary adjustments.'

'I know. For instance the adjustment of keeping quiet while they are being mistreated because they didn't bring sufficient dowry, or being burned alive.'

'Oh that's just the publicity stunts of the women's organizations supported by the newspapers,' Vijoo said.

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'Do you mean to say that they dream up the cases that are reported?'

'Not altogether, but they blow the whole thing up out of all proportion. It's just sensationalism.'

Ravi said, 'Shri, what do you think? You haven't said anything.'

'Since I am not married, and probably never will be, I am not an authority on the subject.'

Ravi said, 'Well I'd much rather marry a girl I happen to love, even if she can't fit in with my family, than a mindless nonentity who spends her life making compromises so that she can fit in.'

'Why do you take it that making compromises is mindless?' Amol said. 'It's the essence of life.'

'Amol, our views on this subject are so different that we had better just leave it alone, all right?'

There was an uncomfortable silence. Amol had married a girl who had very little education, and who was several years younger than him, and Ravi's remark had touched a raw nerve. Ravi on his part thought he understood what Amol and Vijoo were trying to do. It was the old tribal instinct at work. You have married an outsider, you have transgressed and you will be condemned, they seemed to say.

Shri, ever the peacemaker, said, 'I don't know about you people, but I am getting hungry just looking at that food.'

Ravi could not remember how or why Shri had attached himself to their group. He was a village boy, extremely sensitive to the jeers and jokes his sloppy dress and uncultivated speech had invited. He had slowly disciplined himself to cultivate urban speech though there were still words which he pronounced in a way that gave away his background. He had also tried to appear outwardly like them by discarding his loose pajamas in favour of pants and keeping longer hair, though the cut of neither his pants nor his hair really proclaimed him one of them. Inwardly too he had remained different from them, a man who could not or did not want to forget his background, his parents' poverty, his responsibilities. His one aim was to get through college as well as possible, and he worked very hard towards it. The others kidded him for taking life too seriously, for never playing games or going to the movies, and he took the kidding good-naturedly, not because of indifference, but because he intentionally chose the path of least resistance. Life was divided into two parts. One part was the core. The other was

secondary, to be ignored, shrugged off, or tolerated, but not to be fought against with the expenditure of precious energy. Ravi had always respected him, but had sometimes thought that his apparently casual references to the cowdung-plastered floor of their house or the fact that his mother worked as a farm labourer, were made with the specific intention of making the others feel guilty.

The feast was unpacked from paper and plastic bags. There were samosas, mutton cutlets, chivda and mithai, soft drinks and chilled beer.

Ravi said, 'Beer!'

Amol laughed. 'Something special for a special occasion. Although I am sure you are used to much stronger drinks.'

'Not really.'

'Ah, come, you can't make us believe that.'

'It happens to be true. I had an occasional beer, wine once in a while, and hard drinks rarely.'

'All right, we believe you. You don't have to be so defensive about it. It's not a crime to drink.'

All the same, Ravi knew that they probably didn't drink beer at home, which gave this a faintly clandestine air.

Shri refused to drink anything except water.

'Come on, Shri,' Badoo said, 'don't be a spoilsport.'

'I have never tasted alcohol and I am not going to start now,' Shri said, sounding maddeningly righteous.

'Are you afraid one glass of beer will make a roaring drunk out of you?'

Vijoo said, 'Shri, one drink is not going to be entered in your record as a sin, you know. Come on, this is a special occasion.'

Finally Ravi said, 'Leave him alone, fellows. Why do you want to force him to do something he thinks is wrong?'

By this time the evening had lost whatever little spontaneity it had had. There did not seem to be any topic which could provide innocuous conversation. Almost anything provided an outlet for tensions and resentments which were waiting to surface.

When they had finished eating Ravi said, 'Are there any good movies playing in town?'

'Yes,' Amol said with alacrity. 'There are two that I've been wanting to see. That's a marvellous idea, Ravi. Let's go to the movies.'

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Ravi had intended the question only as a conversational gambit, but Vijoo and Bandoos also heartily supported the idea and he found he could not back out.

'All right,' he said. 'Which one do we see?'

Vijoo said, 'You mean you have the entire evening off? Vahini seems to be a very understanding woman.'

Ravi did not respond at all. After an involved discussion, a movie called Premika was selected. Shri begged off, saying he had some work to do.

'Come on, Shri,' Vijoo said. 'Don't be such a wet blanket. We'll pay for your ticket, okay?'

Shri smiled. 'It's better not to get used to things you can't afford. don't you agree? No, but really, I do have some important work.'

After he had left Vijoo said, 'Sanctimonious bastard.'

Amol said, 'Why do we put up with him?'

The movie was a lavish production generously sprinkled with all the usual *masala* of the Hindi screen. Ravi could barely manage to sit through the whole thing without falling asleep. After the movie when they parted outside the theatre he said, 'I had forgotten how incredibly childish and boring Hindi movies can be.'

'You used to enjoy them,' Bandoos said.

'Maybe I have just grown up.'

'I don't know about growing up, Ravi,' Vijoo said, 'but you have certainly changed. You are not one of us any longer.'

It was well past midnight when Ravi got home. Ann was reading in bed.

He said, 'Why are you staying up? I told you I might be late.' He sounded annoyed.

'I am not staying up for you. I couldn't sleep, so I started reading. Did you have a good time?'

'It was all right.'

'You don't sound very enthusiastic.'

'All right, I had an awful time.'

'Why are you mad at me?'

'I am sorry Ann, I am not mad at you. The whole evening was so frustrating. I don't know why they wanted to see me. We really haven't anything in common. They have stayed where they were when I last saw them. Their mental development seems to have been arrested in the last year of college. They

live in such a circumscribed world, and they resent me because I got out of it. They resent me because I went abroad, because I have money and opportunity and an American wife.'

'This is the first time you saw them after a long absence. Sometimes it takes longer to pick up the threads. It will be better next time.'

'I doubt it. I doubt it very much. You have no idea what a chasm there is between us. They inhabit a different world.'

'Never mind. They are not the only people in this city. You will find other friends.'

'Maybe.'

'Darling, don't be so downhearted. Come, sleep here with me.'

'The bed's too narrow for two people.'

'Then let's push the beds together. Please?'

'It will make a racket and wake up everyone.'

'Then can we tomorrow?'

'We'll see.'

He turned off the light and went to his bed. She lay awake and watched for a long time a puddle of light made by a street-light on the floor between their beds.

She thought Ravi was asleep and was startled to hear him say suddenly, *'When we have our own place, the first piece of furniture I am going to get is a giant double bed.'*

She jumped out of bed and went over to kiss him. 'Oh honey, I love you so much. I wish you didn't get so disheartened by little things. We will face everything together and come out on top, you'll see.'

3

'How's the job hunting going, Ravi?' his father asked him.

They were in the living room where they often gathered after dinner. Evening was the time when the family came together. The conversation ran on various subjects—the family farm, college, household matters, people, politics. Ann understood only the gist of the talk, from words she picked up. Sometimes Ravi translated for her benefit. Her father-in-law was the only one who consistently made an effort to talk to her in English, showed any curiosity about her country, or asked questions about her home and family. Ann remarked to Ravi that his father was the only one of them who had any manners, upon which he made no comment.

'Nothing very promising has turned up yet,' Ravi told his father.

'What about that man in Eskay industries? Did you go to see him?'

'Mr Mishra? Yes, I saw him. He offered me a job in sales, which I am not interested in. Besides, they only market 'others' products.'

Mahesh, Ravi's older brother, said, 'Their own brand name is on the pesticides they sell.'

'That doesn't mean anything. They buy technical material in bulk and repack it.'

'Why don't you take whatever is available?' Mr Gogte said. 'Then you can look around for something more to your liking. It will be easier to make contacts if you are already working in the field.'

Ann saw Ravi's mouth set in stubborn lines. This was his habitual response to his father, an immature response, she thought, a left-over from childhood.

Mr Gogte had at first suggested that Ravi work in one of his own companies, which idea Ravi had rejected out of hand. He

had accepted Ravi's reaction with equanimity and given Ravi introductions to several people in agricultural chemicals. Once in Ann's hearing he had said to a friend, 'I told Ravi there's nothing difficult about finding a job. I know enough people everywhere. It's just a matter of my picking up the phone. I've given him a few introductions. Let's see what he turns up.'

Ann could see why his father's patronizing attitude would elicit a negative response from Ravi, but she thought that Ravi could not have it both ways. If he did not want his father to arrange his life, he should not depend on his contacts and influence.

Ravi said now, 'I don't want to work for a company which has no research programme at all.'

Mr Gogte said, 'Once you are inside, you can always convince them to start a research programme.'

'Appa, you know as well as I do that these companies are very conservative. They manufacture standard products according to formulas developed by their parent companies abroad. Whatever research gets done is done abroad, not here. Here they don't want to spend a paisa on it. Why should they, when they have everything handed to them on a platter?'

'I think you are wrong. Some of them do have R and D divisions. After all, the conditions here are different and they at least have to see if the products have the same results, if they are as effective.'

'That's just testing, not developing something new. You can't call that research. Besides, even if some of them do have rudimentary research programmes, I haven't yet found anyone who is working on plant growth regulators which happens to be my field.'

'Do you mean that unless you are given a job in your own narrow field, you are not going to work?' The tone was unbelieving but amused, like that of a father humouring a recalcitrant little boy.

'It is not such a narrow field,' Ravi said.

'You certainly can't say that it's a very broad field.'

'You have to specialize these days to amount to anything. The available knowledge in any field is so vast that you could never hope to master it all.'

Mr Gogte smiled. 'I agree you have to specialize. But shouldn't you have sufficient knowledge of the general subject to work in

any of its branches? If you have a trained mind, you can apply it to more than one thing.'

'But then why did I bother to acquire so much training in a special field? It was all a waste of time and energy.'

'Knowledge is never wasted.'

'That's fine theoretically. In practice if you spend years acquiring a certain kind of knowledge and never use it, it's wasted.'

'All right,' Mr Gogte said. 'Then wait until what you think is just the right job comes along. I was only giving you suggestions because I thought you would be bored just sitting at home doing nothing. I know I am only happy when I am busy doing something, whatever it is. But if you are happy being idle, I have nothing against it. I can afford to support ten generations of you in idleness.'

Ravi's father himself had had a chequered life. After getting a B.A. in history, he went on to study law. He finished his final L.L.B. examination in the year 1942, when the freedom struggle was being intensified and Gandhi had given the call for the British to quit India. Partly out of patriotism, partly from a need for adventure, he jumped into the fray, and spent the next five years running around the country and in and out of jail. By August 1947 he was ready to settle down, much to his parents' relief and happiness. He was no longer interested in a law practice, however, and instead thought that he would take over the family farm which was then being run at a loss. Sangampur was already a fairly large city and he saw the advantages of a city market being so close and put the farm in fruit and vegetables. He knew nothing about farming but he read, he begged for advice, and he learned from experience. He soon made the farm pay, but as soon as the challenge was over, his restless energy demanded a fresh outlet. He then started a small plant for freezing fruit and vegetables. By the time his children were grown up, he had added a factory to manufacture rickshaw meters and an enterprise which made notebooks and diaries. It was understandable that he felt that Ravi was being spoilt and unenterprising. Ravi, however, obstinately maintained that no comparison was possible, as his father's various activities had not required any specialized knowledge. He had only needed some capital, the guts to take a risk, and administrative ability. By no means qualities to be sneezed at, to be sure, but at the

same time not qualities to be compared with the intellectual honing and inductive ability which scientific research demanded. There was a condescension in this attitude which the older man sensed and found inexplicable.

Ravi had been a botany graduate who later studied plant physiology. His special field was plant growth regulators. After getting a Ph.D. he had worked in an agro-chemical company's research division. He had spoken about his work with excitement. During their first meeting he had told Ann, 'Plant growth regulators will become the greatest thing in agriculture in the next two decades. The possibilities are simply fantastic and we have just begun to explore the field.' Ann had taken it for granted that he would step into a similar job in India, because Ravi had not said anything to make her realize that if this was a comparatively new field in America, in India hardly any work was being done in it.

Apart from the fact that, like Ravi's father, she was surprised that Ravi was satisfied doing nothing, she was anxious to have him start earning so that she wouldn't feel completely dependent on his family. She knew of course that they would not be expected to pay room and board, but the realization that Ravi's father paid all their expenses dawned on her the day her mother-in-law made a loud comment about the amount of money Ann's Marathi tuition was costing.

Within a few weeks of their arrival, Ann had asked Ravi to find someone to teach her Marathi.

He had said, 'You are learning by talking to everyone. What do you want a tutor for?'

'Everyone who? People who know English prefer to talk to me in English, and those who don't, prefer not to talk to me at all.'

'How can you say that?'

'Well, you can't say that your family members seize every opportunity of talking to me.'

'I explained to you that Indians are not as outgoing as Americans. They don't make friends as quickly. They take time to get used to strangers.'

'And while they are taking their time getting used to me, weeks have passed by without my knowing enough to carry on the simplest conversation in the language that is spoken all around me. I might as well be a deaf-mute for all the communication I

have with people. I want to learn the language systematically, to be able to read and write as well as speak it.'

It turned out that Shri knew a man who made it his speciality to teach Marathi to students from other states and to foreigners. He had prepared special materials, tapes, an intensive programme of study which required the student to do a lot of homework in addition to attending classes two hours a day, six days a week.

When Mrs Gogte found out about it she asked Ravi, 'What does she need a tuition for? Isn't it enough that we all talk to her in Marathi?'

'She wants to learn systematically, Aai. You learn better and faster that way. Why are you complaining? You ought to be pleased that she is making a serious effort to learn Marathi.'

'Why should I be pleased, because the tuition is costing so much?'

Ann asked Ravi how much the tuition cost.

'Why do you want to know?'

'Because.'

'Whatever it is, we can afford it.'

'I want to know how much it is. Don't treat me like a child.'

'Five hundred a month.'

'Is that a lot of money? You'll have to tell me because I have no idea what anything should cost.'

'Which was exactly why I didn't tell you. Yes, that's quite a high fee. But you need not worry about it, so long as you are getting what you want from it.'

'Oh I am very happy with it, and quite thrilled with the progress I am making. I would like to continue it at least for a few more months, but not if it's going to cost a fortune.'

'Look Ann, if you are happy with it, it's worth whatever we are paying.'

'Who is paying?'

'What do you mean?' he asked, baffled.

'Exactly what I said. Who is paying for it, you or your father?'

'What difference does that make?'

'All the difference in the world, because if your father is paying for it, that gives your mother the right to gripe about it.'

'It doesn't give her any such right. Listen, things don't work here the way they do in America. In a joint family it doesn't matter who pays for what.'

'You can't sell me that, Ravi. She obviously feels that she has the right to complain if I spend too much money. In any case, why do we have to spend their money?'

'Simple reason, my darling. We haven't got any.'

'We have all the dollars we brought '

'I don't want to spend those.'

'Why not?'

'Because we may need them if we go back for a visit.'

'Why would we need all that money?'

'I just don't want to use it up, that's all.'

'Well, in that case you had better find yourself a job quickly.'

'I don't understand what the hurry is.'

'Because I don't like to be dependent on your father.'

'I tell you he doesn't mind it. Anyhow, all this is ancestral wealth, so we all have a legitimate share in it. It's not as though I am a charity case.'

'That's just splitting hairs. Whether it is ancestral wealth, or whether your father has earned it, I can't see how you have a claim on it '

'I do because that's the way things work here, that's the way people feel.'

'Well, I don't feel that way '

'Then you can find a job yourself.'

'Oh I intend to. That's one of the reasons I am learning Marathi. Don't think it's my intention to live off your earnings.'

He laughed. 'Good heavens Ann, don't take it so seriously. I was only joking '

'I am not joking. But honestly Ravi, I can't see what's wrong with taking one of the jobs you have been offered, and then looking around for one that you like. Maybe I am ultrasensitive about this, but even though your father has piles of money and he doesn't mind supporting us, I definitely got the message that he would respect you more if you got a job.'

'I am not going to accept just any job. It doesn't work the way you think. Just by taking a job, especially in a field in which you don't want to work, you are narrowing your options. You become a fixture before you start looking around. I am not going to walk into that particular trap.'

Ann sighed. 'I guess you know best what you want, and I shouldn't nag you. But it just goes against my grain to be under financial obligation to anyone.'

'You had better get rid of some of your American ideas if you want to live happily in this country.'

4

Dear Mom and Dad,

Here's my long-promised detailed letter. You must have already received my earlier letters, although I have not heard anything from you yet. However, mails can be quite undependable here, and I expect I will get a letter in a few days.

I am now quite well settled here. We are still staying with Ravi's family. My mother-in-law is a fairly deadly specimen, but the rest of them are friendly enough. Nobody talks to me very much yet but Ravi says it's because they are not very fluent in English. I am trying to remedy the situation by taking a crash course in Marathi.

There is such a bewildering variety of new things and experiences to tell about that I don't know where to start. Sangampur is a busy and bustling town of about a million and a half. It has grown in a totally unplanned manner, as Ravi tells me all Indian cities have. You find houses, shops, apartment buildings, schools, movie theaters, colonies of huts all juxtaposed without any regard to zoning or architectural harmony.

It is the old part of the city which I find fascinating, with its old-style houses built around courtyards, its maze of narrow streets and alleys, and the shops. I swear I have never in my entire life seen so many small shops selling so many different things. There's cloth, silverware, metal pots, jewellery, books, grain, radios, household appliances, everything you can think of. The variety of consumer goods is bewildering. And they are all indigenously manufactured, which shows that India is far from being an industrially backward country as many people back home tend to think of it.'

Ann stopped to read over what she had written, and was not entirely satisfied with it. Was she beginning to sound defensive? Had she written about the things which had made the greatest

impact on her, the significant things? But which were the significant things? Any single impression or experience, divorced from the whole, seemed meaningless, trifling, unlikely to interest anyone who did not know India. That really was the crux. How do you convey to someone something which is so alien to his experience, especially when you are not sure that he is really interested? Ann's mother had dismissed the possibility that there could be anything interesting or exciting in the country which her daughter had inexplicably adopted. Before she met Ravi, India had existed somewhere in the dimly-felt region beyond the edge of conscious thought. After meeting him she showed a little more interest, more for the sake of making conversation than out of any real desire to know, asking questions like 'Do you get pasteurized milk in India?' or 'Are there a lot of snakes where you live?' Countries like India were not, to her, places where ordinary people lived, but extensive museums filled with whatever was exotic, bizarre, even freakish and perverse. Civilized people, if they felt in a truly adventurous mood, went there as tourists, that was all. It was therefore understandable that she could not imagine that Ann would ever get seriously involved with Ravi, and was outraged when Ann announced her intention not only to marry him but also to go to India with him. She said that Ravi had abused her hospitality by seducing Ann.

Ann had said, 'Don't be ridiculous.'

'Well, it's sex, that's all it is, isn't it? What else has a man like that to offer you that you should throw Jack over for him?'

'I wish you would keep your chronology straight, Mom. I had broken off with Jack long before I met Ravi.'

'That's what you say now. Anyhow, don't sidestep my original question. What is there between you except sex?'

'You want me to give you a list?'

'That's not necessary. Just tell me this, have you slept with him?'

'That's none of your business,' Ann had said angrily.

'That means you have,' Mrs Palmer had concluded triumphantly. She was certain that this charming foreigner had seduced Ann into marriage by letting her taste the forbidden pleasure of exotic sexual practices.

Ann saw the door open and Geetabai, the cleaning woman, walked in, carrying her broom and dust cloth. Ann could not get used to this absence of respect for a closed door. Where she

came from, it was understood that if a door was closed you shouldn't go in without knocking. Here people apparently felt that a closed door was an accidental circumstance, especially if it was not bolted.

Geetabai gave Ann her usual sweet, partially toothless, smile. She was tiny, probably several inches under five feet, and could not have weighed more than seventy pounds. At forty, she already had several teeth missing. But she was very energetic and her energy was most evident in the way she attacked dust with a dustcloth, a noisy and completely ineffective operation.

'Are you writing to your mother?' She asked Ann.

Geetabai had a completely unmodulated voice which exploded out of her as if of its own volition.

She said, 'You must miss her a lot.'

'A little,' Ann said, thinking that it would probably be incomprehensible to Geetabai if she told her that she had not lived with her parents for many years before she came to India. Once she outgrew her childhood attachment and dependence, she had been anxious to get away from her mother's suffocating possessiveness. She had gone to a college only fifty miles from home, but had lived first in the dormitory and then in a small flat which she shared with a friend. Later when she got a job she had moved to a larger flat which she rented on her own.

Geetabai said, 'How far away is your country?'

'Very far. Thousands of miles.'

'I would never marry my daughter so far away.'

Ann smiled. 'In our country parents don't arrange children's marriages.'

'Then who does?'

'The children themselves.'

Geetabai shook her head wonderingly. 'And what happens if the parents don't approve of the match?'

'They have to accept it, because the children won't listen to them if they say no.'

Geetabai kept shaking her head. She obviously didn't approve of such blatant disregard for the proprieties. She said, 'What if the parents threaten to throw a boy out and not support him?'

'Most young boys are on their own and earning their own living by the time they marry.'

'Now that's not such a bad thing.'

She had finished with the room and she went out, leaving the

door open. This, Ann thought, was in keeping with the prevailing idea that doors are not for closing. She got up to close the door.

Ravi was coming up the stairs. He said, 'What do you find to talk about with the maidservant?'

'Quite a lot.'

'Every day?'

'Why not?'

'Well, it just seems strange that you find so much in common with her.'

His mother had commented, 'She has nothing to say to us, but she seems to have a lot to say to Geetabai. These Americans go overboard with their ideas of equality. I don't mean you have to treat servants as though they were dirt under your feet. But fraternizing with them is never a good idea. They will take advantage of you every time.'

Ann said, 'You don't have to have a lot in common in order to carry on a casual conversation. She asks me about my family, I ask her about hers. I've found out all sorts of things about her. She had six children, and only four of them are living. She lives in one room with the children, her mother-in-law and her husband who occasionally gets drunk and beats her.'

'That's nothing extraordinary. It's the story of a million other women.'

'Probably. What I find remarkable about her is her irrepressible cheerfulness under circumstances which would drive most people I know to self-pity.'

'There are so many people who are even worse off that she probably counts herself lucky that she has a roof over her head and a job. And she doesn't have the intelligence to worry about the future.'

'I don't think it's a matter of intelligence. She is certainly not stupid.'

Ravi smiled. 'Now I have shocked your democratic soul. But I wasn't really referring to native intelligence. I meant the ability to think in terms of cause and effect, to perceive the connection between the past and present, and the present and future, and to project yourself into the future. And it is not merely the Geetabais who lack this faculty. The vast majority of people in this country live each day as it comes without thinking of tomorrow or planning for it. They neither weep over their lot nor struggle to better it.'

'That takes a kind of courage too.'

'It's not courage, it's a passive acceptance of life. Fatalism, in other words. It's what induces a lethargy in our people. The usual motives--making more money, bettering one's standard of living--that spur others on to progress don't operate for them at all. They are anachronisms in this age.'

Ann said, 'Maybe they are the people of the future. Why do you start with the premise that there is an inherent value in the idea that there's always something better than what you have and that you must therefore aspire to it? Maybe it leads to progress of a sort but sometimes you wonder whether the progress is worth the price you pay for it.'

'Of course it's worth it. That's the whole point of the evolution of the human civilization--a movement towards better things. That's what keeps a society dynamic, and not enervated and sunk in a morass like ours.'

'Do you think people like Geetabai are sunk in a morass? Don't you think there's any positive quality to their life at all?'

'Frankly, I don't. Which brings me back to what I came to say. I'm not saying that you shouldn't talk to Geetabai at all. Just don't make such a production out of it. Good heavens Ann, anyone listening to you two might think you are long-lost friends.'

'I don't care what anyone thinks. I know your mother has sent you to talk to me. I can't help it if she feels embarrassed because I talk to the maidservant. Geetabai is a friendly soul and I like talking to her. Besides, she is the only person with whom I can practise my Marathi because nobody else will take the trouble to talk to me.'

'Now, Ann --'

'Well, it's true.'

Ravi sighed. He could see why Ann would feel the way she did about Geetabai. Still, he wished that she would show a little more sensitivity to the customs and manners of the country she was living in, not as a tourist but as a member of an Indian family. After all, the whole social setup here was different, and it didn't do to behave as though class-differences did not exist at all.

Ann had at first found it difficult to accept in their midst the presence of Geetabai, this palpably poor and ill-clad woman who was employed to do jobs which Ann had taken for granted that one does for oneself. She felt guilty every time she saw

Geetabai's torn sari or wondered whether she ever got enough to eat. Slowly, however, she was seduced by the sheer comfort and convenience of having someone else do the household chores, and she felt guilty about this too. Even though she tried to tell herself that they were doing Geetabai a favour by giving her a living, she felt in her guts that there was a flaw in this reasoning somewhere. She was disturbed by Ravi's attitude towards Geetabai. It was the attitude people have towards those whom they perceive only as groups. The blacks, the poor, the Russians. If forced to think about it, they would have to admit that each group is made up of individuals who may share some characteristics with the other members but in the final analysis remain unique individuals. Ravi's behaviour denied this possibility. He refused to acknowledge Geetabai's presence by a word of greeting or a friendly exchange of any sort. It was as though he thought of her as a machine which was programmed to perform certain jobs and was beyond the pale of ordinary human intercourse.

Ann was surprised that Ravi would so easily slip back into such a mental frame as though the intervening years had not happened at all. It was even more incomprehensible that he should reprimand her for doing something which was perfectly natural to her

Her mouth set in stubborn lines as she went back to her unfinished letter. She knew that left to himself, Ravi would see her point of view. It was his mother's influence that blunted his judgment

5

Ann's mother had said, 'Even if we grant that you are in love with him, it's not enough to help you adjust to life in a country as far removed from the U.S. as it could possibly be. It's one

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thing to think of India as a romantic far-away country, and quite another to actually live there and put up with all the poverty and disease and dirt and heat day in and day out. And then there are the little things—the food, the absence of simple amenities you take for granted here, the constant wondering whether something is safe to eat or drink—that wear you down. Love won't help you then.'

Ann had simply laughed at her mother but now she admitted to herself that some of the little things, such as food, mattered very much. She found the food in her in-laws' house unpalatable. It was not the unfamiliar taste and texture that she minded, it was the chillies and spices. Ravi's mild suggestions to his mother had not been received well. She had said, 'Are we all supposed to change our eating habits and eat what we don't like for the sake of one person?' So when Ann complained that she had a constant burning in her stomach Ravi said a little impatiently, 'You'll get used to the food after a while. You used to eat Mexican food, and that's as hot as our food, if not more.'

'But that was once in a while, not every day.'

One day Ravi's father asked her, 'Don't you like our food?'

She said, 'I like it fine.'

'You don't eat enough to keep a child alive.'

'I've never been a big eater,' she said. She felt some satisfaction that he had noticed her pecking at her food and commented on it. She gave Ravi a look but he refused to meet her eye. He thought that she was making too much of a fuss over a little thing. She had gone several times to Indian restaurants in San Francisco and enjoyed the food. He suspected that at least some of her complaints merely expressed her resentment of his mother.

Ann was amazed to find how important a satisfactory meal and a full stomach was to a sense of general well-being. She kept a stock of biscuits and chocolate in her room to appease the occasional pangs of hunger she experienced between meals. One day Geetabai traced a line of ants to the cupboard and brought a packet of biscuits and a bar of chocolate full of ants to ask Ann what she should do with them. Ravi's brother's wife was there and Ann felt mortified to have her secret cache discovered in this manner. She told Geetabai to throw the things away. She wondered what Geetabai must think of her.

She daydreamed about an inch-thick medium rare steak or

barbecued spareribs, or a Thanksgiving turkey dinner with all the trimmings.

She asked Ravi, 'Don't you think our diet is too low in protein?'

'Not at all. There are proteins in many of the things that are part of our diet.'

'I mean animal proteins.'

'You have milk,' Ravi said. Ann had found that she did not like the taste of boiled buffalo milk. 'Besides,' Ravi continued, 'I think Americans make a great deal too much fuss about proteins. A human body doesn't need anywhere near the amount of animal proteins that an average American eats.'

Ann, however, remained convinced that her chronic hunger and her occasional feeling of weakness were the direct result of her low-protein diet.

Cooking for herself was out of the question and it wouldn't have done much good anyway as meat could not be cooked in the Gogte kitchen. The one kitchen privilege Ann had acquired was won after a bitter battle. She disliked the tea everyone drank and asked if she could have coffee instead. Mrs Gogte had asked the cook, in a voice that was calculated to convey to Ann that she was causing the poor woman a lot of extra trouble, to make a cup of coffee. The syrupy sweet, barely coffee-coloured liquid which was produced did not deserve to be called coffee, as far as Ann was concerned. So she unpacked the coffee percolator she had brought from the U.S.—a friend had told her that a good coffee percolator was one of the things you could not buy in India—, bought some ground coffee and announced one morning that she was going to make herself some coffee. Mrs Gogte grumbled loudly but couldn't think of a serious objection.

After Ann had been making coffee for a few days, Ravi one morning asked for some, and this caused an explosion.

'Do you feel you have to drink coffee just because your wife does?' Mrs Gogte asked him.

'I like coffee,' Ravi said.

'You didn't think there was anything wrong with drinking tea before.'

'I still don't. It's just that I got used to drinking coffee in America, and since Ann is making it anyway, I would also like to have it instead of tea.'

'It must be very nice for her to have a husband who changes his life-long habits to suit her instead of expecting her to adapt

to the ways of his family. Even in little things it's she who dictates and you who follow like a meek dog.'

'That's enough Aai,' Ravi said. 'Whether I drink tea or coffee is really not an important enough issue to wrangle over.'

Mrs Gogte blazed. 'Now you are shutting me up. That's the way things are done in America I suppose. The moment you marry, your mother becomes a bit of garbage for you, to be thrown out and forgotten. Overnight you forget all that I did for you and can be rude to me for the sake of this white-faced monkey.'

Ann thought, well, an explosion is better than silent antagonism. At least you know where you are.

She asked Ravi, 'Why does she resent me so much?'

'It's nothing against you personally.'

'Then what is it?'

'It's just that you are not her idea of the kind of girl she wanted me to marry.'

'Well, you weren't the kind of husband my mother visualized for me. But she tried to argue me out of it, she wasn't rude to you.'

'It's not really fair to compare your mother with mine. In your society it has long been the accepted custom for children to marry whoever they want without worrying about what their parents think. So the parents have learned to live with it. Ours is a very rigid society in which parents traditionally arrange their children's marriages. Naturally a very traditional woman like my mother feels hurt because I didn't even consult her about my marriage. And then the fact that I married a girl who doesn't belong to our caste or religion or race compounds the insult.'

'But since our marriage is now an accomplished fact, what can she possibly gain by refusing to accept it, and going on behaving like this? She can't undo the marriage. Or is that what she hopes to do?'

Suddenly Ravi was angry. 'Don't be an idiot. You don't know what you are talking about.' Then he added more mildly, 'Just have patience. Give her a bit of time, and she'll come round.'

But Mrs Gogte remained completely unyielding as far as food was concerned. Ann continued being bothered by mild stomach upsets, diarrhoea, queasiness. When she mentioned these symptoms to Ravi, he suggested some medicine in a voice that made it clear that he thought she was being a hypochondriac. It

was therefore with a feeling of perverse satisfaction that she found herself really ill. Her diarrhoea was very bad, she had stomach cramps and a temperature. She felt too miserable to get out of bed one morning and Ravi was finally sufficiently alarmed to call up their family doctor who suggested that Ravi bring her to the consulting room in the afternoon.

Dr Durvey, who had been the Gogtes' family doctor since Ravi was a child, was a small kindly-looking man with salt and pepper hair and large thick horn-rimmed glasses. Ann felt like a clumsy giant next to him.

He said, 'Well Ravi, I hear you've been back for some time. But it takes an illness for you to come and see me, eh?'

He examined and questioned Ann at length and ordered blood, urine and stool tests.

'The tests are just to make sure of the diagnosis and rule out complications,' he said, 'but I can tell you now that you have probably got what most of your countrymen end up getting—amoebic dysentery. And I'll tell you what I keep telling everybody. If you get amoebic dysentery, you have only your own carelessness to blame for it. I don't suppose you take even the most rudimentary precaution of drinking boiled water.'

Ravi said, 'We none of us drink boiled water.'

'Yes, but don't you think it's a necessary precaution for an American who has not been immunized from birth by drinking our dirty water? I'd also recommend that you stick to a bland diet,' he told Ann, 'at least until the worst of your symptoms have cleared up. I am sure you are not used to highly-spiced and hot food, and it can only irritate your digestive tract.'

The next day when they went back to Dr Durvey with the test reports he handed them a long list of medicines.

He said, 'You are slightly anaemic. It's probably due to the amoebic infection, but you should try to eat more proteins.'

'Don't you think too much emphasis is put on proteins these days?' Ravi asked.

'Perhaps, perhaps. Nothing's been proved one way or another. My point is, each body has its own metabolism, its own habits and needs. It's not equipped to adjust quickly to a drastic change in diet, from a very high protein one to a purely vegetarian one. As I said, she is somewhat anaemic, she's lost quite a bit of weight lately. Nothing serious, but these are not good signs. So don't

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let her go native all at once. I know meat is not cooked in your house, but let her eat eggs.'

Ann felt amply vindicated. She felt grateful to the kindly little doctor.

Ravi said, 'How are we going to manage to feed you meat?'

Ann felt she could afford to be magnanimous. She said, 'Surely it can't be that important. You mustn't take seriously everything a doctor says. Besides, he did say eating eggs would be enough.'

Ravi wondered when and how she would eat eggs as nobody in the family ate eggs either. Maybe she could boil an egg for herself every morning. And what about the bland diet, and the boiled water?

'Darling, don't look so harassed,' Ann said. 'I am sorry to be so much trouble.'

He smiled at her, suddenly overcome by a protective love for her. She looked so sick, poor thing, and so thin. He had been an inconsiderate brute.

He said, 'You are no trouble, Ann. You can't help it if you are sick. I had no idea it was something so serious. Why didn't you tell me?'

Ann desisted from reminding him that he had chosen to dismiss as hypochondriacal the complaints she had made.

Ravi did not say anything about the bland food the doctor had recommended, and she did not bring it up as she saw that it would be useless. He did ask the cook to boil some water for her, however. And although nobody objected to it, almost everyone commented on it. They made faces and said, 'I don't know how you can stand to drink that water. It has no taste at all.' It served to show that they viewed Ann's effort to set herself apart in this manner in an unfavourable light, especially as she condemned herself thereby to drinking unpotable water.

6

Inasmuch as it was possible Ann slowly settled into the rhythm of life in the Gogte household. Things which had seemed very strange ceased to bother her very much. Other than Ravi's father who was willing to discuss the topic of the day with her, and had been happy because of her interest and taken her round his factories, the others still communicated with her only when absolutely necessary, and then in the minimum possible words. She thought it strange that they had so little curiosity about her life before marriage, her country, her family. But even this she learned to accept with equanimity. She herself was intensely curious about everyone. She tried to talk to Mohini, Ravi's sister, about her college and friends and what she would like to do, and was amazed that Mohini had not thought about the future at all.

Ravi said, 'Nothing surprising about that. Like most girls, she knows that marriage is the big question-mark in her life, and there is no point in making plans without taking it into account.'

'There are question marks in everyone's life. That doesn't stop them from making plans. Most people have to change their plans several times midstream anyway.'

She asked Mahesh about the family farm which he managed. He answered her questions politely, but without enthusiasm. When she commented on it, Ravi said, 'Everyone can't summon up enthusiasm for everything, Ann. May be he finds the work boring.'

'Boring? I think farming must be an exciting thing to do.'

'It's no more exciting than any other work. In fact a lot less exciting than many activities I can think of.'

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'Isn't your work connected with agriculture?'

'In a way. But it's far from being anything like routine farming. Research is original, creative.'

She said, 'Can we go visit the farm some day? How far is it from here?'

'About ten kilometres.'

Despite Ann's mentioning it several times, he made no move to take her to the farm. Then one morning while having tea he said to Mahesh, 'Ann's been wanting to see the farm. Why don't you take her sometime?'

'Sure,' Mahesh said, 'Do you want to go today? I'll be leaving in half an hour.'

Ann said, while changing into jeans in their room, 'I wanted you to take me, not parcel me off with Mahesh. How could you just ask him to take me without checking with me first to see whether I want to go with him?'

'Don't you want to go? I'll tell him so.'

She was outraged. 'Of course I'll go, now that you have already asked him. I just wish you had asked me first. Besides, how do you know he wants to bother with me?'

'Why shouldn't he?'

She shrugged. 'He certainly didn't sound wildly enthusiastic about the prospect.'

'What do you expect him to do? Jump up and down and clap his hands?'

Ann gave up. She said, 'Why don't you come too?'

I have to see this man at Bhoodhan Agro-chemicals.'

'We could go to the farm some other day.'

'I'm not that keen on a visit to the farm.'

'You have come to a lot of places you didn't find interesting, just to show them to me.'

'Well, look Ann, the farm is Mahesh's. I mean he runs it. Legally I suppose I have a share in it, but I don't want to claim it. And I don't want him to feel that I am interested, or trying to interfere.'

'You can just come as a visitor.'

He shook his head and Ann knew that she was not going to be able to persuade him. She was fascinated by these nuances in family relationships. Outwardly smooth relationships apparently existed in a delicate balance which could be upset by the wrong word or gesture. Ann wondered whether everyone was constantly

on their guard or whether keeping the balance, learned from an early age, became instinctive.

She was dismayed to find that Mahesh had taken out the car.

She said, 'We don't need the car, do we? I don't mind going on the motorbike with you. In fact, I think it would be rather fun.'

'The car would be more comfortable.' He said it in a voice that would brook no opposition. Ann didn't like to use the car, except when they were all going somewhere together, since her mother-in-law had indicated on more than one occasion that it was an imposition for Ann to want to use the car. But she gathered that it would not be quite the thing for her to ride on the motorcycle with Mahesh.

She said, 'I am sorry Ravi sort of forced this on you.'

'It's all right, I don't mind. I go to the farm every day anyhow.'

His face was bland, neither sullen nor friendly. Ann watched his profile and thought that the looks in the family were unevenly distributed. Mohini, who was darker than Ravi, nevertheless had his fine features. Of course the family considered the dark skin such a handicap that they thought it cancelled out the good looks. In Mahesh the features seemed to have got flattened out. A little overweight, he looked phlegmatic and flabby, as though he had given in to life. He dressed carelessly in ill-fitting pants and a short-sleeved open-collared shirt, replaced at home by a pair of pajamas and a kurta. But whereas Ravi managed to look quite elegant in a kurta-pajama outfit, Mahesh looked merely sloppy.

He ran the twenty-five acre farm, had been running it for several years, yet there was a curious diffidence in his manner.

He said, 'Compared to an American farm, this must seem very small to you.'

Ann said, 'Since I have never been on an American farm, I have no basis for comparison.'

They were walking by a plot of cauliflower.

She asked, 'Do you use your own vegetables for freezing?'

'No, not all. The best of the produce is sold fresh, especially when the prices are high.'

'Then where do you get the vegetables for the freezing plant?'

'We buy some from farmers who are far away from the big city markets and willing to accept our price, and some from the market here when something is plentiful and cheap.'

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'Who buys frozen vegetables?'

'There is a limited market for them, mostly in Bombay. Frozen vegetables are quite expensive.'

'Why does anybody buy them then, when fresh vegetables are available the year round?'

'Saves time and trouble. Actually if you consider the time spent in shopping and cleaning, and the wastage frozen vegetables are not all that expensive.'

'What's this?'

'Sugarcane.'

'I had always wondered what a crop of sugarcane looks like. What do you do with it, sell it to a sugar mill?'

'I sell it for juice. It's a special variety used for making juice. Sugarcane juice is a very popular drink here, especially in the summer, and it's much cheaper than the bottled cold drinks.'

'And much better for you, I am sure. What does it taste like? Is it very sweet?'

'It is, but when they serve it they put lemon and ginger and plenty of ice in it. Then it's quite nice.'

She was fascinated to see a whole row of women weeding, especially as they did it sitting down, moving forward in that position.

She said, 'Are a lot of farming operations still done manually?'

'Yes, but more and more time-saving devices are being used by farmers now because labour is becoming very costly.'

'You are very patient to answer all my questions. You probably think I am very ignorant.'

'Well, you are a newcomer to our country, so it's natural that you don't know much about agriculture here.'

'You must get fed up with all the questions you have to answer for all the visitors.'

'You would be surprised how few people ask questions. They are not really interested in knowing anything, they only come to see the farm because it's the thing to do.'

He had paid her an indirect compliment and she was quite pleased with it. She was glad now that Ravi had not come along and she had had this chance of talking to Mahesh.

'Does your father's family belong to Sangampur? Is that why they own land here?'

'No, they came from the coast, like all the people belonging to our caste. My grandfather bought this land.'

'Is the caste-system still rigid?'

'I suppose so. In some ways at least.'

'Is that why your mother didn't like Ravi marrying me? Because I don't belong to your caste?'

'It's got nothing to do with caste. There was a girl from our caste whom Ravi had wanted to marry but my mother still didn't approve of her.'

'Why not?'

Mahesh hesitated. He looked as though he had said too much and would like to end this conversation.

Ann persisted. 'Why not?'

'Because she wasn't suitable.'

'In what way?'

'Well, she had the reputation of being a fast girl. She went around with boys.' Mahesh's ears were red. He looked acutely embarrassed. He added, 'Also Aai felt that Ravi was too young to marry. He hadn't finished college yet.'

'And why doesn't she approve of me?'

'It's not a question of approval. She just didn't think an American girl would fit in here.'

'I see,' Ann said.

Mahesh looked very uneasy and, turning away from her, he called the supervisor over and started giving him instructions about the grape harvest that would be started in a couple of days, the materials to be purchased and the labour that would be required.

Ann said, 'Are these grapes ripe?'

'Some of them are.'

'Can I pick a bunch to eat?'

'Sure, I'll pick one for you.'

He clipped off a bunch with a pair of small clippers and handed it to her.

'Wipe them before eating,' he said. 'They have been sprayed.'

She said, munching on one, 'They are a little sour, but delicious. I like the flavour.'

'It's a variety called Kali Sahebi.'

'Do you know, I have never before picked a bunch of grapes off a vine and eaten it, and I have lived in grape-growing country all my life.'

'Have you?'

'Yes. Only most of the grapes there are made into wine.'

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'Is it very beautiful where you come from?'

'It's very beautiful.'

Mahesh said wistfully, 'I'd like to go to America sometime. Just to look around.'

'Why don't you?'

'I don't know. Maybe I will, one of these days. It costs a lot of money.'

'If Ravi could afford it, certainly you can.'

'Perhaps if I had gone to study there—. But just for a short visit—I don't know,' he said again.

When they finished their round of the farm he said he would drop her back.

'Don't you have anything more to do?'

'I'll come back.'

'I would like to stay, if you don't mind.'

'You will get bored.'

'I am not easily bored,' she said, smiling. 'Go ahead and carry on with your work. I'll just stick around. I won't be in your way.'

He still looked doubtful, but finally took her at her word. She watched him supervise the mixing of a spray solution for spraying cauliflower, then she wandered over to where they were harvesting cabbage for the market, preparing the heads by slashing away the outer leaves. Then she saw Mahesh standing over some men weighing out fertilizer to be put in the sugarcane. For a while she sat under a tree lazily watching men and women moving among the crops doing their appointed jobs and thought, I like being here. It's so peaceful, and the peace comes from the slow rhythm of the kind of activity, not so much from an absence of noise.

When Mahesh joined her she said, 'Did you study agriculture or learn it on the job?'

'On the job. I should read, but I just don't get around to it.'

'Well, practical knowledge is all that's really necessary, isn't it?'

'That's what Appa says. He has contempt for bookish knowledge. But I feel one should have some theoretical background too, to become a really good farmer. Farming is no longer something you go on doing the way your father and grandfather did before you. There are new techniques being developed, new crop varieties, pesticides. You can't keep up with it all unless you read.'

‘Why don’t you then?’

‘Too lazy.’ He smiled, and it occurred to her that he smiled rarely, and a smile made his face quite attractive. She had seen him playing with his daughter who was a cute two-year-old and his obvious favourite, and that was almost the only time he smiled a lot.

She said, ‘How did you happen to go into farming, if you hadn’t specially studied for it?’

‘When I was in the third year of college Appa asked me how I would like to take over the management of the farm. He was too busy with his other activities by then, and didn’t have time for the farm. I thought it over, and the idea appealed to me. I had no particular plans for what to do after college. So I thought, what could I lose? Having a job while my friends sweated for a degree which wouldn’t guarantee them jobs anyway, was an attractive proposition.’

‘And now do you regret your decision? Do you wish that you had finished college and gone abroad like Ravi?’

‘Appa probably wouldn’t have sent me. My marks were never all that good, and I might not have got into a university there.’ He thought a while and said, ‘No, I think I’d be quite happy if I were given complete responsibility for the farm.’

‘Aren’t you?’

‘No. Appa is the one who takes all the decisions. Even which crops to plant, when to harvest, where to sell. I have to submit budgets and accounts to him. I can’t spend any major amount unless he sanctions it. In fact, the account is operated by him. He draws cheques for payments, and all the produce is sold in his name. I am really nothing more than a *mukadam*, a supervisor.’

‘But then what’s the financial arrangement? Does he pay you so much per month, or a share of the profits, or what?’

Mahesh shook his head.

‘But that’s terrible,’ she said. ‘It’s really unfair. Why don’t you ask him to make some such arrangement?’

He said nothing as they got into the car and he started it. As they approached town she said, ‘Thank you so much, Mahesh. I really enjoyed the visit to the farm, and also the chance to talk to you.’ Then she asked, impulsively, ‘Why didn’t you ever talk to me before? Why doesn’t anyone talk to me?’

‘Don’t they?’

'Oh come now, you can't pretend that you have all been very friendly with me. Why not? Just because I am a foreigner?'

He was silent for such a long time that she felt she had probably broken whatever tenuous contact she had established with him, and that he was not going to answer her at all.

Finally he said, in a low voice, haltingly, 'Well, Aai was against your marriage, you know. So I thought—we thought, well—that there might be unpleasantness if any of us made friends with you.'

Ann was really shocked at his answer. She thought, they say that the American society has become unstable because parental authority has broken down. But is it worth having stability at such a price? She marvelled at the equanimity with which Mahesh went on working under controls he resented, refusing to assert his independence, his right to share in decision-making or the handling of money. And she was simply aghast that they all treated her like an outcast without a trial, simply because the mother decreed it. She thought that if she were offered a choice between a stable society which was run in this authoritarian repressive fashion, and a chaotic one in which everybody was given the freedom to go his own way even if it meant self-destruction, she would choose the latter.

On the way back, while they were still on the outskirts of the town, Mahesh stopped in front of a hut which carried a sign 'Sugarcane Juice Bar' and said, 'I thought you might like to see what cane juice tasted like.'

The hut had walls and roof of bamboo matting. Inside were rough wooden benches and in a corner an electric-powered cane crusher and a table with glasses, lemons, and a small barrel of water.

Mahesh said, 'In the old days they used to have a bullock-drawn crusher.'

'How cute. Why did they stop?'

'Takes too much space. And it's more convenient to have electric crushers rather than keep bullocks and worry about feeding them.'

Their juice came in tall frothing glasses clinking with ice.

Ann sipped hers and said, 'This is good, you know. One of the most delicious drinks I have ever tasted.'

'I'm glad you like it.' Then he said, 'You won't mention our conversation to anyone, will you? About the farm?'

'Not if you don't want me to, Mahesh. But I still think you ought to talk to your father. May be he doesn't realize that you want a freer hand. You should make him see how unfair this arrangement is.'

'He realizes everything. He is no fool. He just likes to control everything. He wouldn't let go his authority.'

'Suppose you were to insist?'

'Then he would throw me out and get another supervisor. Where would that leave me? I am not even qualified to get a job.'

Ann nodded. There was nothing left to say.

When she told Ravi that she had drunk sugarcane juice he made a face and said, 'You'll be lucky if you don't end up getting jaundice or something.'

7

Ravi groaned. 'Not another invitation! I am fed up. I think we should start turning them down.'

'Not this one,' his mother said. 'Mr Patwardhan is one of your father's oldest friends. They will be quite offended if we don't go.'

'Actually we should be giving a party. All my friends keep clamouring for one.'

She didn't say anything. Obviously she didn't intend to give a party for Ravi and Ann. Her husband had once suggested that they have a sort of reception so that their friends and relatives could meet Ann and she had said, 'They are welcome to this house any time. Nobody's stopping them from coming and meeting her.' In household matters Mr Gogte did not interfere and so he had kept quiet. Ravi wondered why she was being so difficult. He had expected her to show some resistance to accepting Ann but her shutting her mind completely was

beyond all reason. Usually she couldn't wait to reciprocate an invitation, feeling that she was putting herself in an inferior position if she didn't return someone's hospitality immediately. Yet now she was reluctant to have a reception because it would mean publicly accepting Ann.

When Ravi had written to them that he was marrying Ann Mrs Gogte had replied, 'It's not that I am against it. I think only in terms of your happiness, and I know that in the long run such a marriage cannot be happy. An American girl can never adjust to our way of life. She will never become part of our family. And ultimately she will take you away from your people.'

Ravi knew that if that's what she was really afraid of, it would be impossible to reassure her. The only thing to do was wait, because trying to reason with her might do more harm than good.

On the day of the party Mohini came to Ann with a wine-red silk sari and said, 'Aai says you are to wear this.'

Ann's immediate reaction was to say she didn't have to take orders from her mother-in-law. But she thought it would be childish to spurn this gesture which might be termed friendly. Also she had been longing to drape herself in a sari.

She merely said, 'But I don't know how.'

'I'll help you.'

There was a petticoat and a blouse which Mohini said her mother had got made by giving a tailor approximate measurements. She put the sari on Ann, pinned Ann's thick shoulder-length brown hair into a bun and circled it with a garland of mogra. Then she opened a jeweller's box and gave Ann a gold necklace, bangles and earrings. The finishing touch was a large red dot of kunkoo. Ann was quite thrilled with her appearance.

Ravi said, 'Where did the jewellery come from? It looks new.'

'Aai bought it for Ann.'

'When was this?'

'Yesterday. Same time as she bought the sari.'

Ravi raised his eyebrows at Ann but made no comment.

She said, 'Well, how do I look as an authentic Indian lady? Isn't this sari just beautiful?'

'The sari's all right.'

'But I'm not?'

'Well, you don't look quite right in this outfit.'

‘What do you mean?’

‘It doesn’t suit you. Not the way a dress does.’

Mohini said, ‘She looks wonderful. You just don’t think so because you are not used to seeing her in a sari.’

He held his hands up, palms out, and said, ‘Okay, I know when I am outnumbered. Ann, you look lovely.’

Mohini raised her hand and he ducked and went out of the room smiling. He was happy that Mohini had at last taken the first step towards finding some rapport with Ann. Of all the members of his family, she was the one he had counted on and he had been quite disappointed when she showed no inclination to make friends with his wife.

Once he had tried to talk to her and she had said, ‘I am not unfriendly, am I?’

‘You might be friendlier. Offer to take her shopping maybe. Or for a walk. You hardly talk to her.’

‘What can I talk to her about? We have nothing in common.’

‘How do you know?’

‘We come from such different backgrounds.’

‘For god’s sake Mohini, don’t you ever talk to someone from a different background?’

‘There’s also the problem of a common language. You know I can’t speak English fluently.’

‘You will become fluent with practice. It won’t hurt you to improve your English by talking to Ann.’

‘In any case, I have no time. My final exams are coming up and I have to spend all my spare time studying.’

Ann made an instant hit at the party, apparently mainly because she had tried to look ‘Indian’. Her mother-in-law seemed to glow with pride and pleasure, and Ann understood why she had gone to so much trouble to have Ann project this image.

Mr and Mrs Patwardhan could best be described, Ann thought, as a sweet old couple. They both spoke very good English and had very Westernized manners. Mr Patwardhan had been in the foreign service, had now retired and come to live in Sangampur where his family had lived for generations. They had a beautiful house in Vijayanagar Colony, tastefully and lovingly decorated. Ann thought it a charming combination of Indian materials and motifs and the mementos of foreign sojourns.

It was a buffet party with about twenty guests. There were groups of small tables and chairs on an open terrace and on the

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lawn. A bewildering number of dishes were artistically arranged on a long table covered with white damask. Mr and Mrs Patwardhan hovered over Ann as she served herself.

Mrs Patwardhan said, 'You are taking such small amounts.'

'I am not too familiar with all the dishes, so I would like to try only a little bit before I take larger servings of whatever I like.'

'Do you like Indian food?'

'I've learned to like some of the dishes, but I still find it a little too hot.'

'Try the egg-curry, it's not very hot.'

After Ann had settled herself at one of the lawn tables Mr Patwardhan said, 'How do you like Sangampur?'

Ann was a little disappointed that this question should have been asked by a much travelled man like him.

She said, 'I like it very much.'

'What do you like about it particularly?'

At least he did not stop at eliciting an obviously superficial response to his question.

She said, 'It's hard to say, but probably what I enjoy most of all are the different levels at which life is lived—primitive and modern, fast and slow, poor and rich. You know, while cars and buses whizz madly by, a woman sits on her front step holding her baby on her lap, calmly watching as though she had all the time in the world. Or expensively dressed people flit in and out of expensive looking shops outside which beggars jingle a few miserable coins in their bowls.'

'This is very interesting, my dear. But may I let you in on a secret? Those ragged beggars who jingle their few miserable pennies actually make quite a good living, often a better living than a man who works hard all day.'

. Ravi, joining them, said, 'That's what I keep telling her.'

'It's hard to believe. They look so dirty and ragged and ill-fed.'

Mr Patwardhan said, 'They get rich because they don't spend on things like food and clothing and rent. And they can't of course dress better because their appearance is their stock-in-trade.'

A group of late arrivals was coming through the living room on to the terrace. Ann saw the absolute amazement on Ravi's face as a young woman detached herself from the group and walked towards him.

He stood up and said, 'Usha! I can't believe this. What are you doing here?'

'I am invited, the same as you,' she said with a mischievous smile.

She was a small woman, perhaps only five feet tall, with a heart-shaped face and finely drawn features which should have added up to beauty but didn't because she was too thin, almost gaunt. There was a tenseness about her which was heightened by her unusually large eyes. She looked as though she was being held together only by great strength of will.

Ravi said, 'Ann, meet Usha Kanet—, oh I am sorry, I don't know your married name.'

'Kanetkar will do,' she said. 'I am glad to meet you,' she said to Ann. She had a low, rather husky voice and a radiant smile which transformed her face. Ann thought, she is a damned attractive woman.

Ravi said, 'Where is your husband? Is he here?'

'He is dead. He died in an air crash, not in the war but afterwards.'

'My God, I had no idea. I am so sorry.'

'Not your fault,' she said with a faint smile. 'He was on a routine flight dropping supplies in a part of Assam which had been cut off by the floods. Nobody knows how it happened. His plane just crashed.'

'How awful,' Ann said.

'Are you living in Sangampur?' Ravi asked her.

'Yes, with my in-laws. I am working on my Ph.D. I was stupid enough to have left college to marry. So after my husband died I went back to college. I hope to be able to get a job once I have a Ph.D.'

'What's your subject?' Ann said. She counted it a point in Usha's favour that she hadn't gushed over her Indian get-up. Ann was beginning to get a little irritated at everyone else's reaction. It seemed to imply that by this gesture Ann had admitted the superiority of Indian culture.

'English literature.'

'You know, even though I should have known it, it came as a revelation that English is practically an Indian language.'

'It is, only the Indian constitution doesn't list it as one.'

'Is that right? I wonder why not.'

'Because we are a people who don't like to face reality. We

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are full of patriotic poses and we think we have to reject English because it was the language of our rulers. At the same time we rush to put our children in English medium schools of course.'

Ann had met two kinds of people—the ones who became defensive when anything Indian was criticized, and the ones who became excessively critical. On the whole she preferred the latter kind, because the former became tiresome in their efforts to prove that India was superior to all other countries in every field. And especially because they were talking to Ann, they equated proving India's superiority with running down everything American. They also, Ann had discovered, stressed all the wrong things—India's glorious past, for instance, or the gracefulness of the sari, or the tastiness of Indian food. She had once met a man in a bookshop who very earnestly told her that meat-eating dulls the brain, and vegetarian fare keeps it alert, which is why Indians are intellectually superior to Westerners and many young people from the West who realize this are taking to Vegetarianism.

Usha said, 'How long have you been here?'

'A couple of months.'

'Do you like it here?'

'Yes, very much.'

'Do you and Ravi plan to stay here or have you just come for a visit?'

'We plan to stay.'

'Really?'

'You sound skeptical.'

Usha laughed. 'I find it difficult to believe that someone from your country would want to come and settle here.'

'Why?'

'Give me one good reason why anyone should. Why would you want to, for instance, if you discount the fact that you married Ravi?'

'Actually, I had wanted to come to India even before I met Ravi. Not just as a tourist. I wanted to live for a while in a society which is very different from ours. You know, if you live in a country like the U.S., you get lulled into believing that there's only one way of life, and that's the American way. I wanted to get out of that rut, to find out what makes other people tick, what their motivations are.'

'And of course you have your own country to go back to.'

Ann couldn't help smiling. 'Yes, there's that.'

She noticed that Ravi had wandered away sometime during the conversation. She collared Mohini and asked her, 'Is Usha the girl Ravi had wanted to marry?'

Mohini looked startled. 'Who told you about that?'

'Let's say I heard it around.'

'She's the one.'

Mohini looked at Ann strangely but Ann didn't say anything further. She put her empty plate away and was offered a betel leaf at which she shook her head.

Mrs Patwardhan said, 'Have you ever eaten one?'

'No.'

'Try it sometime. It's supposed to be very rich in all kinds of vitamins and minerals. It's not a taste easy to cultivate but people who do like it are absolutely addicted to it.'

'I don't like the idea of getting my mouth all red.'

'That's the lime and catechu. You don't have to put it in.'

Ravi said, helping himself to a betel leaf, 'She only likes her mouth red on the outside.'

Ann said, 'Even that not always.'

When Mrs Patwardhan was out of earshot, Ann told Ravi, 'I like Usha. She is a very attractive woman.'

'We were in college together.'

'Why didn't you marry her?'

'Why the hell should I have married her?'

'A little bird told me you wanted to.'

'Well, your little bird is misinformed. We just went together for a bit, but it didn't mean anything.'

When they made their good-byes Ann told Mrs Patwardhan, 'You have a very beautiful house.'

'My, you speak good Marathi.'

Ann laughed and said, 'I was composing that one sentence all evening.'

'Still, you are trying to learn, which is more than our daughter-in-law condescended to do.'

Ravi's mother said, 'She is taking lessons from a tutor. Anybody else would have said she would learn by and by and left it at that, but not our Ann. She has to go about it systematically. She works very hard at it, too. Practises with tapes for hours.'

The obvious note of pride in her voice took Ann's breath

away. She was amazed at the hypocrisy, yet she had to admire the aplomb with which her mother-in-law had established family solidarity.

Mrs Patwardhan said, 'That's very commendable.'

Ann said, 'I didn't know you had an American daughter-in-law.'

'We do.'

'Where is she?'

'Oh they both went back long ago. I don't think she had ever meant to stay here. She acted like a superior being who couldn't be expected to live among junglis like us. Nothing here pleased her. We put ourselves out to make her happy in this country but it all meant nothing to her.'

'Well, I guess if she just wasn't happy here-'

'You can be happy anywhere if you try.'

Ann thought of her mother. When she had finally given up dissuading Ann from her decision to go to India, she had said, 'Well, if things don't work out, you can always come back.'

Ann had indignantly said, 'Why shouldn't they work out?'

'You call yourself liberated, but at heart you are just an old-fashioned girl who is in love with the idea of following her husband to the ends of the earth. You don't even want to admit the possibility that something might go wrong.'

Ann had thought, maybe she is right. I don't want to leave loopholes through which I can slip back. I don't much care for the picture of myself staying in India for a couple of years with the idea of eventually coming back always at the back of my mind, and then telling Ravi that I gave his country an honest try but just couldn't make a go of it, and finally returning with him in tow.

Yet she didn't want to make a virtue of it and was not pleased at being favourably compared with Mrs Patwardhan's absent daughter-in-law. What she did was her business, and her husband's.

She told Ravi later, 'I didn't much care for Mrs Patwardhan. She was so bitchy about her daughter-in-law.'

Ravi struggled. 'It's natural, I guess. He is their only son, and they have lost him because of his wife.'

'He chose to marry her, and he chose to go back with her. So how can you blame her for it?'

'You can't expect his mother to be so logical about it.'

'Mothers of sons have a special licence to be illogical, do they?'

'Well, the average Indian mother expects her son to marry and continue living with her.'

8

Ravi was quite taken aback the first time Usha came to the house. He had been pleasantly surprised to see her at the party, and had showed his pleasure openly. Still, he hadn't expected her to turn up again. After the party his mother had said, 'I hope you're not going to take up with *that* girl again.'

'Don't be ridiculous.'

'Why do you think she came to the party?'

'The Patwardhans are neighbours of theirs.'

'Mrs Patwardhan told me she said she would love to see you again and meet your wife, so really she invited herself.'

'Maybe she did. Nothing wrong with being curious about your old friends.'

'She is a widow now.'

'So what?'

'Just be careful.'

'I probably won't ever see her again, so stop worrying.'

He thought his mother was being quite absurd, and he really didn't see any likelihood of Usha following up on their casual meeting, or any reason why she might want to.

He was the one who opened the door for her and said, 'Usha, what brings you here?'

He must have looked and sounded flustered, for she smiled coldly and said, 'Don't worry, I haven't come to see you, I have come to see Ann. Is she home?'

She and Ann discovered that they enjoyed each other's

company, and Usha became a frequent visitor to the house. They fell into a relationship of easy friendliness.

Usha told Ann, 'You know, that Indian get-up I saw you in made me think that you were the usual Indian-culture-struck American who thinks that Indian culture is contained in gorgeous saris and quaint rituals.'

'And now you have found that I am not?'

'Um—not entirely.'

'Well, thank you.'

Usha laughed. Ann said, 'No, I mean it. I ought to be grateful to you for exploring beyond the first impression, because I like having someone to talk to. Other than Ravi, I mean. Nobody else in this family is willing to give me the time of day.'

'Not even Mohini?'

'She is friendly enough, but she keeps her distance. They all do. After the day I spent at the farm, I thought I had found some kind of rapport with Mahesh, but he is as cool and formal as before. And Uma just smiles. Or I should say used to smile. Since the Raju episode everything's changed. It was such a stupid incident, too. I was lying on my bed reading, and these kids pushed the door open and just stood there gaping at me. I know I shouldn't have, but I began to feel embarrassed. I was in my slip, and I suddenly felt them staring at my bare legs and arms. I mean, I probably wouldn't have minded if they had come in and said hello, and Raju had introduced his friends. But they just stood there staring as though I were an animal in a zoo. Then Ravi came. He lost his temper and chased the kids away and shouted at Raju. Uma was home and must have heard everything. Since then she avoids looking at me.'

'Ah, what do you care? Uma is a cow anyway.'

'I prefer to be surrounded by friendly people rather than people who send bad vibes.'

Usha gave a bark of a laugh and said, 'You ought to come and live with my in-laws. Then you would think yours are overflowing with friendliness.'

'Why do you live with them then?'

'I have no alternative. At least until I finish my Ph. D. and can get a job, I have to stay with them, because I would have no way of supporting myself and my daughter. But don't breathe a

word of this anywhere. If they have the shadow of a suspicion of my plans, they would kick me out right now and not allow me to take Rasika.'

'If they don't like you, why do they want to hold on to you?'

'Oh if I walked out tomorrow, they would be very happy, so long as I didn't take their son's child away from them.'

Ravi still didn't feel very comfortable when Usha was around. He made some excuse not to accompany them when they went for a walk or for window-shopping. And when he was home and in the same room, he read the paper while they talked.

One day Usha said, 'Ravi doesn't object to my coming here, does he?'

'Of course not. Why should he?'

'He behaves as though he doesn't particularly like my presence.'

'Listen, you are a friend of mine, you have a perfect right to come to this house.' Then she asked, 'Did you and Ravi really want to marry?'

Usha hesitated just a little before saying, 'I had no idea you knew about that.'

'What happened?'

'What usually happens in such cases. His mother.'

'Why was she against it?'

'I suppose she didn't think I was suitable for Ravi. He had everything, money, social status, brains, looks. I had nothing.'

'I don't know about money or social status, but I wouldn't say you lack brains or good looks.'

'Obviously you haven't been in India for very long, otherwise you would have known that in our dictionary looks means colour. Without a fair skin beauty of features counts for nothing. And in addition to everything I had a bad reputation. Well-deserved, probably.'

'What do you mean?'

'I dared to make friends with boys, to talk to them and be seen with them openly.'

Ann started laughing.

'This is not a laughing matter, Ann. Indians take the purity of their women very seriously.'

'Okay. So what did Ravi's mother do?'

'Why don't you ask Ravi?'

'He won't even admit that you were anything more than just casual friends.'

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Usha smiled wryly. 'One day he just told me that we would have to stop seeing each other. He said his mother had given him an ultimatum. Unless he stopped seeing me and had nothing further to do with me, he would be thrown out of the house and would not receive a single paisa from his parents.'

'And Ravi said good-bye to you? Just like that?'

'Well, I suppose he must have felt that he would have to sacrifice too much. It would have been the end of his education. He would have had to get a job and we would have had to live in a style in which he could never have imagined living.'

'Didn't he ask you to wait or anything?'

'What would have been the point of that?'

'I must say you accept life with equanimity. I would never have forgiven him.'

'My forgiving him is rather beside the point, isn't it? Oh I was very bitter at the time. I made scenes, hurled accusations at him, wept, wrote him letters which were never answered. But now I realize that given the circumstances, he really had no alternative. Even if he had been heroic enough to marry me, we would probably have struggled along and fought with each other and had a miserable life.'

'I think it's cruel to use your position as a provider to badger your children into submission.'

'I agree. That is why I derive a great deal of satisfaction that Ravi finally married against his mother's wishes anyway. I was very curious to see the woman Ravi married, that's why I wangled the invitation to the Patwardhan's party.'

'And were you disappointed?'

'No, I think you are right for Ravi. He needs a strong wife.'

'You don't think you would have been strong?'

'Who knows? I don't even try to imagine myself in that role. It was all so long ago and so much has happened since.'

Ann asked Ravi, 'What is it with you and Usha? If it has something to do with what happened so long ago, I think you are being childish.'

'I don't know what you are talking about.'

'I am talking about the way you always find an excuse to go out when she comes, or hide behind a book, and refuse to go anywhere with us.'

'She comes to see you, doesn't she?'

'Yes, but it wouldn't hurt you to be ordinarily polite to her.'

'I am not aware that I am impolite to her. It's just that I haven't got that much to say to her. Actually I am surprised that you get along so well with each other. You two are such different types.'

'Maybe it's the attraction of opposites.'

9

Even though Ravi's father had said that he didn't care whether Ravi worked or stayed idle all his life, he kept on making fresh suggestions for jobs. Ann saw that at least part of the reason for this was that he felt that Ravi's not taking a job amounted to a refusal to commit himself to living in India. He was very sensitive on this point. He bristled at any criticism of India or any favourable comment about America from Ravi, as though it was a prelude to returning there. One day he was reading the paper and came across an article recommending that special incentives be given to students abroad to induce them to come back.

He said, 'Why should we offer them bribes to come back to their own home? If they want to stay there, let them. I say good riddance. We are a vast country with endless human resources. A handful of people who settle abroad are not going to make any difference to us.'

Ravi said, 'The amount of fuss people make about them, the handful of people do make a difference. Otherwise everyone would leave the subject well alone. You don't find Americans screaming about their citizens settling abroad.'

'Not many of them do,' Ann said. 'And the ones who do America is happy to get rid of.'

'What about you?' Mr Gogte said.

'Oh I am probably on their files as an undesirable citizen. I have joined so many protest marches and sit-ins that my name

is probably on some sort of black list. I am quite sure that they are happy to have a troublemaker like me out of the country.'

Ann failed to see how Ravi could continue idle in the face of the pressure being put on him.

He said, 'I wish Appa would quit nagging me. I have told him that I am not going to take just any job, and I am looking for the sort I want.'

'Oh Ravi, I don't want to nag you, but I do wish you would get a job, so we can move out of here and be on our own.'

'I didn't know you were so unhappy here.'

'Well, I am not exactly miserable, but I want a home of my own and I want to run it my way, not live like a visitor here forever.'

'I thought you would be happy to be saved the bother of housekeeping.'

'That's how much you know about me.'

'All right Ann, we'll get a place of our own.'

'Not at your father's expense.'

'Why not, if you want it so badly?'

'I just couldn't stand being under obligation to him to that extent. Supporting us while we live in his house is one thing, though I must admit even that bothers me, but I couldn't accept his paying for a separate household.'

'In other words, you want me to accept the first job that comes along.'

'I am not that desperate to move out, but just keep it in mind.'

Ann wondered whether Ravi had planned to park on his parents indefinitely. She was surprised to hear him say that he didn't know she was unhappy. How could he expect her to be happy in this house when he saw people treating her like an outcast? Or did he just choose to pretend that everything was quite normal?

In the event help came from an unexpected direction. Dr Durvey had called her back some time after she had finished her course of medicines. She had done what most people do, neglected to go back to him because she had begun to feel much better. When she experienced a recurrence of her symptoms she was alarmed and went to see him. The doctor gave both her and Ravi a piece of his mind.

'If you can't take even the ordinary precautions I suggested, going on prescribing drugs is no good.'

Ann was still anaemic and had lost some more weight. Ravi asked his mother,

'Aai, couldn't you keep some of the dishes bland for her? She is having a lot of stomach trouble and Dr Durvey said she should have a bland diet for a while.'

Mrs Gogte said, 'I don't see how that is possible, unless we all eat tasteless food.'

'Couldn't you just take out a small portion before you add the spices and chillies?'

She said coldly, 'Obviously, you know nothing about cooking, otherwise you wouldn't have made such a ridiculous suggestion. You have to cook the spices with the vegetables to flavour them properly.'

Ann said, 'I wouldn't mind cooking some vegetables for myself separately.'

Mr Gogte said, 'Yes, that might be a good idea.'

His taking part in the exchange infuriated his wife. 'When does she propose to do it? With so many people to cook for and all your visitors who have to be served tea and snacks at all hours, none of the burners is free even for half an hour.'

In the face of such a completely unbending stance, Ravi felt he had no option left but to move out.

Ann had visualized house-hunting, but predictably, Mr Gogte had a friend who had a cottage which he was willing to let Ravi have. They were to pay no rent, because he wanted to be sure that he would be able to get them out in a few years when he would retire and come to live in Sangampur. However, he expected them to pay for whatever maintenance was needed. Ann thought wryly that the way things were done in India, nobody had much of a chance to exercise volition. However, she was far from displeased with the house. It was a two-bedroom cottage with a small garden, practically at the foot of Waghjai Hill. The garden was uncared for and a tangle of weeds, and the house had flaking paint, dirty floors and grimy woodwork. But all that could be fixed, and Ann looked forward to doing it.

There was still the problem of money, and Ann tried to get Ravi to take a loan from his father which they would repay later. Mr Gogte at first laughed at the idea, but finally agreed, which Ann thought proved her point that he didn't really like them sponging off him.

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Mrs Gogte was outraged at the idea of their setting up a separate house.

'Why are you moving out?' she demanded of Ravi. 'There's plenty of room here.'

'It's not a question of room, Aai.'

'Then why are you making a separate home right here in the same town? Are you not looked after properly here?'

'Of course we are. But we would just feel more comfortable on our own.'

'It's she who is insisting on it, I know. That's always the way. She dictates and you listen. You have no mind of your own, and you don't care what people will say.'

Mr Gogte said, 'What can people say? They are ready to talk no matter what happens. Why should you pay attention to them?'

'We live among people, don't we? We don't live in the jungle by ourselves. How can we ignore what people say? And they will have a right to talk. It's not the custom here for a son to make a separate home in the same town where his parents live. These boys marry foreign wives and then act like their pet cats. Why should this girl marry him and come here with him if she didn't want to follow the customs of his people? Today she takes him out of our house, tomorrow she will take him out of the country. I always knew this would happen.'

It was a difficult period for all of them. Ravi's mother went on fuming and muttering, and Ravi went around with a grim face. The pressure was so palpable that Ann was afraid Ravi might give in to it. But he stood his ground. Ann suggested that they move as soon as they could.

'It doesn't matter if some of the repairs and painting are not done. We will get everything done bit by bit. And it will be easier to supervise the work if we are on the spot.'

She also insisted that they buy as few things as possible to begin with. Even so, the amount of shopping they had to do involved days of searching and selecting and tireless walking.

At first Ann tried to do her own shopping. She said, 'It's more of an adventure here, because you don't get everything prepackaged and standardized.'

Usha said, 'You won't think it such an adventure when you get saddled with something substandard and complaints don't get you anywhere. This is an economy of shortages where the shopkeeper is king.'

Ann soon found out what Usha meant. She bought a pair of chappals and one of the toe straps broke after one use. She took them indignantly back to the shop. After explaining to her that they did not have a repair service, they sent a shop assistant with the broken chappal to a cobbler as a special favour to her. It was repaired by having a big shining rivet driven into it and Ann had to pay fifty paise for the privilege of getting it repaired. Nobody in the shop looked even slightly abashed at having sold her a defective pair of chappals.

Ravi said, smiling at her discomfiture, 'You should be no stranger to built-in obsolescence.'

'Built-in obsolescence does not mean having something break down practically before you begin to use it.'

One day she brought a leg of mutton from the mutton market and roasted it in her newly acquired stove-top oven. It turned out to be incredibly tough. Distressed, she exclaimed, 'But the man swore it was tender.'

Ravi said, 'May be you didn't cook it right.'

'If there's one thing I know, it's how to cook meats.'

'May be meat here doesn't lend itself to being cooked the same way.'

She said angrily, 'What's wrong with simply admitting that it was a tough old goat?'

Ravi burst out laughing. Usha laughed too, when Ann told her about it. 'You are a very naive buyer if you go by what the salesman says about his own wares.'

Ann decided that the time was not yet ripe for her to do her shopping independently. Not until she learned the culturally-determined framework within which people operated. She felt she couldn't afford to go wrong when she bought more expensive items.

Usha went shopping with her and started giving her lessons. 'You can't buy anything without examining it first. Don't let the shopkeeper wrap it up before you have had a look at it.'

'But that would make shopping an endless business.'

'Not necessarily. I'll give you a useful tip. Find one good shop of each kind and then stick to it. Once the shopkeeper gets to know you as a regular and reasonably big customer, he will be careful about what he sells you. Once you have a standing there, you are also more in a position to complain about something substandard and make them take it back.'

Ann told Ravi, 'This is such an education. It makes me realize what a parasite I was. I am so glad we decided to have a place of our own. Otherwise I would never have learned to shift for myself. I am really enjoying this. It's such a good feeling being responsible for your own life.'

'I am glad you are happy.'

'Aren't you?'

'I guess so, but right now I am feeling a bit bogged down by masons and carpenters and painters and the clutter of materials all over the place.'

10

Ravi finally accepted a job with Owen Chemicals, a multinational company which manufactured drugs and pesticides. He thought that since he wasn't getting what he wanted anyway, he might at least work for a company that paid well.

Ann gave a squeal of delight 'Oh that's wonderful news, Ravi.'

The woman who came to clean was mopping the floor and looked up startled. Ravi felt embarrassed. In America such gestures had seemed natural, and endearing. Here they seemed childish. He felt that especially in front of servants she should behave in a more decorous fashion.

Ann said, 'What do you have to do?'

'I am going to be working in their agro-chemicals division doing field testing of new pesticides they are putting on the market.'

'Why do you sound so glum?'

'I have held out for so long, Ann, waiting for something better, and finally I have ended up accepting this. It seems like committing myself for good to something I don't enjoy doing.'

'It doesn't have to be for good, you know,' she said gently. 'Sooner or later I'll also work, and then you can give up your job and look around again. But for now I am glad that you will start earning. How long can we go on sponging on your father?'

Besides, you are now responsible for providing for three of us.'

'What?'

'You heard me.'

'I am just making sure I heard right. Did you say you are going to have a baby?'

"We" is the correct pronoun. There's nothing unusual about it, Ravi. When a potent male has sexual intercourse with a fecund female, it often results in pregnancy.'

Ravi still looked dazed. 'How do you know?'

'How do I know it results in pregnancy?'

'How do you know you are pregnant?'

'How does anyone know?'

'Are you sure?'

'Not a hundred per cent, but my period's three weeks overdue, and I've never been irregular. What's the matter with you? Men are supposed to act stupidly pleased at receiving such news.'

'Women are supposed to whisper such news in the dark blushinglly '

'How would you know whether I was blushing or not, in the dark?'

'You know what I mean. Look at you announcing the thing matter-of-factly as though you were telling the baseball score. Come into the bedroom, damn it. I want to kiss you.'

'You could have kissed me right here if this woman wasn't underfoot.'

Ann had at first laughed at the idea of employing a servant, saying that she could surely manage the housework for the two of them. Ravi said she didn't know what housework involved in India without any appliances. Finally she had given in and employed a part-time servant. She felt ashamed that she already found the woman almost indispensable, although she still grudged the loss of privacy.

Ann told Ravi that they must have a party. 'We have so much to celebrate. The house is all done now, and there's the baby coming, and your job.'

'What's there to celebrate about a job? Everybody is getting a job all the time.'

'Everybody is having babies all the time too. So let's just call it a housewarming party.'

He was finally infected by her enthusiasm and started making a guest list. Inevitably, Ann sought Usha's help.

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Ravi said, 'Why do you want to bring her into it? Can't we give a party by ourselves?'

'Are you going to help me decide on a menu, shop for the food and cook?'

'I guess not. It's just that she has been here a lot lately.'

'I couldn't have done any of this without her help, Ravi.'

She told Usha, 'You have helped me set up the place, now you have to help me with the housewarming party. Then your duties will be officially over. Honestly, I don't know what I would have done without you.'

'That has a final ring, as though you intend to dismiss me once the party is over.'

'Don't be silly.'

'Really Ann, you don't know what it has meant to me, getting to know you and having this place to come to.'

On the day of the party Usha turned up, to Ann's surprise, with her little daughter, a rather chubby six-year-old.

'You don't mind, do you, Ann?'

'Of course not. She can help us, won't you, Rasika?'

'Make a nuisance of herself, more likely. But I've brought her along to prove my honourable intentions.'

'What do you mean?'

Usha laughed. It occurred to Ann that though Usha laughed frequently, her laughter was rarely joyful.

'My mother-in-law has a very suspicious nature. She has dropped hints lately that she thinks I am using you as an excuse to meet my lover on the sly. Today when I said I was going to spend the rest of the day here, and might return late, I could see her getting ready to accuse me. So I casually said I was bringing Rasika along. You should have seen her face fall.'

Ann thought that such skirmishing was childish. She said, 'But my God, Usha, there's nothing wrong with your meeting a man, is there? Why does it have to be on the sly?'

'She expects me to remain faithful to her son's memory all my life. How could I sully it by having a liaison with another man?'

'Is there a man?'

Usha hesitated. 'Well yes, there is someone. He wants to marry me, but I am not sure I want to yet. We are good friends and we meet often because we are both in the English department.'

'I've been meaning to ask you, Usha. If your parents-in-law are all that you say, couldn't you live with your parents?'

'My father is dead, and my mother lives with one of my brothers. I also lived with him, but I always had the feeling that he would like to have me off his hands. When I passed out of high school I applied to a college in Sangampur and stayed in the hostel. Almost as soon as I finished my B.A. I met and married Arvind. I don't know what it's like for officers in the armed forces in your country, but here junior officers don't always get family quarters as soon as they get a new posting. And with a border post there aren't any family quarters. The government takes no responsibility for providing housing for an officer's family. All of which means of course that I spent a good part of my married life, including the time of my delivery, with my in-laws. And when Arvind died, there was no other place I could go to, nobody else I had any claim on. So here I am and here I have to stay until I can support myself and Rasika. There is some money--Arvind's pension--coming to me but it wouldn't be enough to set me up in a flat. It would require a lump sum which my in-laws would not give or loan me. The insurance money all went to them because they were named the beneficiaries when Arvind took out the insurance before our marriage. So I am saving whatever I can out of the pension money. My mother-in-law is quite bitter about this. She feels that if Rasika and I live with them, I should pay all that money towards expenses. Not that they need it, but they just enjoy making my life difficult.'

'It's so awful for you to be trapped in a situation like this.'

'I live through it by telling myself that the end is in sight. But Ann, don't breathe a word to anyone, anyone at all, even Ravi, about my friend. If my mother-in-law hears about it, she will move heaven and earth to take Rasika away from me. So I have to be very careful. Of course even later it's not going to be easy to take her with me, but I try not to think about that.'

After finishing the preparation of the food, they went to get dressed. At Ann's request Usha had brought one of her own saris for Ann. Ann had said, 'I have been wanting to buy myself one, but I am not going to until Ravi starts earning.'

When she had put on the sari she said, 'I feel so clumsy in it, especially next to you. You are so graceful.'

'Most American women don't look good in saris.'

'Oh no, are you one of those people?'

'Well, look, our figure types are different. American women have more streamlined figures, slim and straight, with narrow

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hips, much more suited for dresses and pants. A sari needs a narrow waist and wide hips like mine.'

'There's something in that. It probably also has something to do with the way a woman who wears pants and dresses holds herself, moves her body, that wouldn't look nice in a sari.'

'Instead of a sari, why don't you get yourself a salwar and kurta? You would look good in it.'

Usha herself looked radiant in a midnight-blue chiffon, with pearls around her throat and a glow which came as much from expertly applied make-up as from the excitement of the party.

The guest list had become quite long. There were Ravi's friends and their wives, and a few of their neighbours. Mohini was there, and Mahesh and Uma with the children. Ravi's father was not in town, and his mother, Uma explained, was not well. She had sent a present, a peacock-blue silk sari with silver motifs.

'Oh this is gorgeous,' Ann said 'Thank you.'

Ann didn't really believe that Aai was sick. She had never been sick during the entire period of Ann's stay. She had chosen not to come, obviously because she had not forgiven Ann for making a separate home. Yet she had felt it necessary to send a present. Ann had noticed that her mother-in-law was always very strong on observing the proprieties. She would make a nasty comment about someone but then go to the trouble of assembling an elaborate gift for her new born baby's naming ceremony.

Uma said, 'How nicely you have fixed up the house.'

'Why, thank you.'

Ann had tried to keep things as simple as possible, opting for a divan and a mattress on the floor covered in a bright handloom material rather than a sofa set. There was a cotton carpet and plenty of cushions of various sizes that people could use either to sit on or to lean against. The room looked very cozy and inviting.

It was a buffet meal, since Ann's small dining table could not possibly accommodate all the guests.

Mohini said, 'Have you made all this yourself? It's very good.'

'No, the credit for the meal goes solely to Usha. She's been slaving in the kitchen since this morning. I only helped her.'

Ann saw that Usha sparkled. Her eyes shone, she talked animatedly, and she bore herself with the confidence that she

was the most attractive woman there. She was one of those women who automatically acquire an extra allure when men are present.

Shri was sitting in a corner by himself and Ann went over to him.

'You are very silent tonight.'

He smiled. 'A teacher gets tired of hearing his own voice.'

'What do you teach, Shri?'

'Zoology.'

'Do you like teaching?'

'It's all right, but I don't feel totally dedicated to it or anything like that, because some day I want to give it up and go back to my village.'

'What will you do there?'

'I want to run a really good school there.'

'Is it a very small village?'

'Quite small. There are about five hundred families.'

Bandoo was telling some story loudly and with much gesturing and the end was greeted with laughter from the men and tolerant smiles or long-suffering gestures from the women, so Ann gathered that it must have been a risqué story. Shri watched with a faint smile. His dark face was impassive and rather undistinguished-looking, Ann thought. Also tight and closed.

She said, 'Ravi told me you have a farm.'

'Don't visualize something like his farm. We have barely two acres. There is a well which can irrigate only a small piece out of this. The rest of it is only good for growing one crop of jowar in the year.'

'I would like to see your farm some day.'

'My parents live in a very primitive house which has no modern facilities. You wouldn't like it.'

'I have lived in primitive conditions while camping out.'

He smiled. The smile curled up only one corner of his mouth. He said, 'I imagine that this wouldn't be quite like camping out in America.'

'You are not very hospitable.'

'That's just the trouble. We are very hospitable people. If you come to Pawarwadi my mother will insist that you eat with us and stay for at least a couple of days. She is a very simple illiterate woman who doesn't understand that our food and the conditions we live in may not be acceptable to everyone.'

COME RAIN

He spoke as though from experience, as though his mother's hospitality had been spurred by someone, perhaps a college friend whom he had taken home.

Ann said, 'I should like to spend a couple of days with your family.'

'You don't know what you are letting yourself in for.'

'If you don't invite me, I'll never know, will I?'

He just smiled a little sadly, but did not issue the invitation she was asking for.

Vijoo was saying loudly, 'But what's the alternative? Your precious Janata party and their shenanigans make one feel that the Emergency was better.'

Ravi said, 'Give them time. They've only been in power for a year.'

'One year's quite enough to judge them by. They haven't done anything. They are just bumbling along and fighting among themselves. Instead of coming to grips with the real problems facing this country, they are only interested in appointing inquiry commissions and hounding Indira Gandhi.'

'There's nothing wrong with inquiry commissions. Somebody's got to bring to the people's attention the horrors of the Emergency.'

'What horrors?'

Being jailed without trial, not being able to say or write what you felt, having your phones tapped.'

'You have been reading too much American propaganda. Believe me, it made no difference to the day-to-day life of the common man. At first we all thought it would, you know, in a good sense. Everybody talked about the trains running on time and government officials being afraid to take bribes. But in a very short time everything was back to normal. Emergency or not, we people will never change.'

'Didn't you feel the loss of freedom?'

Bandoo said, 'Nobody did. You seem to think that this was like one of these police states. That's what we are trying to tell you, that for most people there was no difference, no loss of freedom.'

Shri suddenly spoke up. 'That's not true. One did not feel that one was being told the truth about anything. The papers were just dummies handing out what the government news agency fed them. And you know the radio and TV are only

mouthpieces of the government anyway. You heard about all the people being jailed but nobody corroborated the rumours. Then there were the people trying hard to dissociate themselves from organizations which were suspect. It just was not a good atmosphere.'

'You talk like an intellectual, Shri. How many people in this country read newspapers, or listen to the news? Only a few educated people in the cities. How many people in your village felt the difference in the atmosphere?'

'A lot of them did. That's just where you are wrong, Bandoo. It's the educated urbanite's conceit that only he values freedom. That's a fallacy. Even the poorest and lowliest person values his freedom.'

'Give me an example. Don't just spout philosophy.'

'I'll give you an example. There was a small dam being constructed near our village. The access road to our village from the highway was going to be submerged when the dam was completed. The villagers had made a representation to the Collector and he had agreed that the final stage of work on the dam would be held up until a new road was constructed. Work had been started on the road, but it was not yet complete when the Emergency was declared. For no reason, suddenly the work on the road was abandoned and work on the dam was resumed, with a view to finishing it before the monsoon. The villagers were angry and in spite of being warned that it was illegal to do so, they took out a protest march, quite peacefully, to the office

of the Assistant Collector. They were arrested and taken to the taluka jail where they—men, women and children—were detained for forty-eight hours without food or water before they were released. They were indignant because the government had, for no good reason, gone back on a promise, and they held a meeting and decided to do satyagraha to stop the work on the dam unless their demand for a road was granted. They were not deterred by threats. Finally some wise government officer staved off an ugly incident by ordering work to be started immediately on the road. If you had been at that meeting, you would have been told that the ignorant illiterate villager loves his freedom as you do, Bandoo.'

'That's an impressive story, Shri. Were you there at

the morcha.

COME RAIN

Vijoo said, 'That's just one example. It doesn't prove anything. I still say that the average Indian cares more about the practical business of living than about some vague idea of freedom.' He smiled. 'Philosophically speaking, who is free? We are all slaves of Fate.'

Ravi persisted. 'Are you saying, Vijoo, that most people—and you are among them, I take it—approved of the Emergency?'

'I am saying that they didn't really care one way or the other. They would have approved if the Emergency had eased the problems that harassed them, but unfortunately nothing of the sort happened.'

'So at least you have to admit that the Emergency was a futile exercise.'

'Maybe.'

'That's at least something gained. People like to think that only some form of autocratic government can cure their ills, without realizing that the ills result from historical, socio-economic, psychological factors which cannot be changed overnight by any government.'

Bandoo said, 'Whether the Emergency was right or wrong, effective or futile, it's over. Why don't the Janata people show what they can do instead of going on and on about what Indira Gandhi did wrong? Why this negative approach?'

'I'll tell you why,' Vijoo said. 'Because they are not mature politicians, they are clowns, all of them. One is a tailless monkey, another drinks his own urine. How can you take people like that seriously?'

Shri said, 'What difference does it make if someone drinks his own urine? Why does everyone make such a fuss about it?'

'Because he does,' Usha said. 'He made a point of telling the press about it. If it didn't make any difference, why didn't he just keep quiet about it?'

Ann said, 'I read somewhere that drinking your own urine is an accepted form of treatment for certain diseases. Is that true?'

'It's true enough,' Ravi said.

'Ugh!' Usha said. 'It's such a disgusting idea.'

A scooter stopped in front of their house and a few seconds later the doorbell rang.

Ann said, 'Who could it be at this time of the night?'

Usha had suddenly paled. She said, 'My God, it's almost

midnight. I didn't realize it was that late. It must be my brother-in-law.'

Ravi opened the door and a young man came in, going straight to Usha and saying, 'It was very late. We thought you might not be able to get a rickshaw here at this time of the night, so I came to fetch you.' He didn't bother to acknowledge anyone else's presence.

Usha went to Ann's bedroom to fetch Rasika, and Ann followed her in.

She said, 'How did he know where to come?'

'They insist that I give them exact addresses of every place I go.'

'What a mean thing to do, sending him after you.'

'At least they will know now that I wasn't lying when I said I was coming here. Of course I'll still get a lecture for keeping Rasika out so late.'

'But she was sleeping.'

'Yes, but it disturbs her. So they claim.'

'You are her mother.'

'Try telling them that. Well, I'd better get going. Thanks for everything, Ann. I don't know when I have enjoyed myself so much lately.'

The party broke up soon after Usha left.

Ravi said, 'It was a good party. I think everybody enjoyed it.' Then he added, 'It's nice to be by ourselves, you know. You can do what you please without worrying about anyone else being disturbed.'

'You should thank me. If I hadn't nagged you, we'd still be living with your parents.'

'I thank you. But the double bed was my idea.'

'If you say so.'

'I do say so. To encourage spontaneity.'

'Now where have I heard that before?'

11

Ann's mother was absolutely thrilled to hear that Ann was pregnant. She wrote a long letter full of advice. Did Ann drink at least a quart of milk every day? How about meat, fish, eggs?

COME RAIN

She must have a high-protein diet. And regular exercise every day. Had she seen a doctor yet? A good doctor? She was to make absolutely sure that she was getting proper medical advice, because there were so many quacks in these backward countries. Maybe it would be a good idea for her to plan to have her delivery in the States. Would she like to do that? Dad would gladly send her the fare. There was a postscript. 'I am sending you by air mail two bottles of multivitamin pills which Dr Ricardo recommended. He said you should take two of these a day. I am also sending you a copy of Dr Spork.'

Reading the letter, Ann smiled, then sighed. The maternal tentacles were trying to reach her across thousands of miles. She had felt a real pang of sorrow when she bid them good-bye at the airport, seeing her mother's tear-ravaged face and thinking that perhaps she would never see it again. Her father had an arm round his wife, feeling her need, trying, despite all that had gone wrong between them, to give her some comfort by his touch. Looking at his sad-wise face as he said 'good-bye' and 'take care' and 'let us hear from you', the separation had suddenly become real to Ann. She had kissed him and felt the rough dry touch of his skin, smelled the faint aroma of his after-shave lotion mixed with cigarette-smoke and the stale smell of woollen clothes in need of cleaning. Tears sprang to her eyes as she walked away from them, the gruelling days of tearful pleading and recrimination momentarily forgotten. Ann wondered what life was going to be like for her mother and had been relieved when she judged, through letters, that the older woman was quite happy.

Ann was the youngest of five children, and, because of the gap between her and the next oldest, a brother, for all practical purposes an only child.

She was an independent child, and tended to be rebellious when her mother tried to impose any restrictions on her. Their relationship was stormy, yet close. As Ann grew up, however, she began to be stifled by her mother's protectiveness. She craved more independence, and after a period of unabating strife, decided that the only way to escape her mother's obsessive love was to leave home. She had not foreseen her mother's reaction to her announcement that she was going away to college. Her mother wept and begged and finally when her father interceded on his wife's behalf, Ann agreed to a compromise.

'Ann, you must make allowances for your mother. She has been through a bad time, and that has left its scars. She came back to normalcy only because of you.'

'Does it mean I have to carry the burden all my life? She is making it impossible for me to live in peace, Dad.'

'I know how it is, Ann. I am not saying you have to stay here. Just pick a college that's closer, so you can come home week-ends.' He held his hand up to stop the protest he saw coming. 'Wait till I've finished. You won't actually have to come every weekend. You can taper off your visits after the first few weeks.'

Ann was not happy to have to change her plans. 'What exactly is, or was, wrong with Mom?'

There had been nothing extraordinary in what happened. Mrs Palmer had been a busy and happy housewife, needing nothing outside her home and husband and children, receiving whatever sustenance she needed from them. The children and housework kept her busy, and she had not cared, or really even noticed, that she and her husband were, during this period, drifting apart. He was involved with his work, she with hers, and whatever time they had together was spent in an impersonal kind of harmony. Life was full, and it was good.

When things changed, it seemed to her that they changed overnight, because she had not allowed for and made small adjustments to the process of change. One by one the children left the nest. She began to have hot flushes and sudden breathlessness and irregular periods. She began to feel her husband's absences keenly and thought that he spent less time at home than he ever had. Childless and husbandless all at once, she felt as though all her functions as a woman had come to an end. She alternated between deep depressions when she drank excessively, and aggressive moods when she seized on the slightest excuse to pick a fight and was impossible to placate or please. She had always been a meticulous housekeeper but now she let things slide. She couldn't summon sufficient energy to cook a meal and her husband, after coming home, would find her sitting at the dining table staring at the cooking range. He would then cook an omelette or heat a couple of TV dinners, or coax her into making the effort of getting dressed and going out to eat.

As the warmth between them had, over the years, been slowly replaced by a more casual surface relationship, sex had also tapered off into an occasional encounter. They had both been

COME RAIN

well enough satisfied with this state of affairs. She had expressed to a close friend the suspicion that he looked for sex elsewhere. 'Men are animals,' she had said. 'No matter what they are—college professors or actors or cops—sex is the only thing that matters to them. They don't care about anything else.' However, she had chosen to leave him alone. Now she suddenly began to accuse him openly of having an affair with someone. That could be the only reason, she argued, why he had lost interest in her. The most innocuous remarks, gestures, phone calls aroused her suspicion and she pestered him for the woman's name. Denials got him nowhere. The only thing that brought temporary peace was proof that he was sexually interested in her, proof which, under the circumstances, he was unable to give her very often. The situation deteriorated steadily and he wondered how long it would be before he walked out on her.

She noticed her abdomen growing and, fearing a tumour, went to her doctor. Wary of her reaction, he told her that she was probably pregnant. A test confirmed the diagnosis. She was at the time forty-two. She had been drowning, and had suddenly been handed a lifeline. She clung to it with everything she had.

She felt that there was a special bond between her and Ann. As Ann grew up and demonstrated her need for independence, Mrs Palmer grew more demanding. She saw every withholding of a confidence as a rejection and was hurt by it. She worried incessantly. She was terrified that Ann would get involved with the wrong kind of man and start taking drugs or become a hippie and leave home to go to some Eastern country where she might die of some horrible disease. She kept herself awake nights thinking of Ann lying anonymously dead in some foreign country, with nobody to identify her or even give her a Christian burial.

Every time Ann started going with a new boy Mrs Palmer insisted that he be brought home and introduced to her. She badgered Ann for information about him. She went to absurd lengths by going through Ann's drawers and steaming open her letters. When Ann lost her temper Mrs Palmer became tearful and begged forgiveness on the grounds that she was only trying to protect Ann.

She thought Ann always got involved with the wrong causes. Against her protests that Ann was too young to understand what she was doing, Ann had marched in a demonstration against the Vietnam war. Later she was active in the campaign to register black voters and to establish the right of the children

of ethnic minority groups to be taught through their mother-tongue. She helped raise funds for starving Africans. Mrs Palmer couldn't understand why Ann was not interested, for instance, in sports or painting or music. Also, she did not agree with Ann on most issues. Collecting money for starving Africans was innocuous enough (although she suspected that the leaders of the fund drive had leftist inclinations), but allowing anything except English as a medium of instruction in schools was inviting trouble. And protesting against the Vietnam war was definitely eccentric and probably unpatriotic. Aside from this, Mrs Palmer thought that protesting against something was a negative way of relating to life.

Once when Ann announced her intention to fast for two days, Mrs Palmer was outraged.

'It's not good for you, and I won't permit it.'

'Fasting for forty-eight hours is not going to do me any harm.'

'What will it accomplish? Are the starving people of the world going to get more to eat because you starve for two days?'

'They might if a lot more people did it. Americans eat far too much. And there are all these people who starve because they have no food. They starve for days, weeks. I want to see, on a tiny scale, what it feels like. I've always had every thing. I want to see what it feels like being deprived of something my body needs.'

'There are a lot of experiences you will never have.'

'True, but this one I am going to have. A lot of people advocate occasional fasting you know, to clean out the system. Gandhi fasted to purify himself'

After the fast was over Mrs Palmer asked, 'Do you feel purified?'

'No.'

'So it was just a futile exercise.'

'Not entirely. I have experienced what real hunger is like. I will never take food for granted again.'

'I will never understand you, Ann. You are always out to prove something.'

Ann's decision to marry Ravi was totally incomprehensible to her, and she therefore felt it as an international rejection.

'You are marrying him only to have an excuse to go as far away from me as possible.'

'How can you say that, Mom?'

COME RAIN

'Why else would you want to marry him and go and bury yourself in a poor backward country for the rest of your life?'

'I happen to love him.'

'Love! You talk as if it was something you can feel only for one man. A few months ago you loved Jack.'

'I found out I didn't really love him. That's why I broke off with him.'

Mrs Palmer pounced. 'How do you know you won't find out that you don't really love Ravi?'

'Because what I feel for him is different from what I felt for Jack, or anyone else.'

'It may be different but that doesn't mean it's going to last. It's just a temporary infatuation and you are mistaking it for the kind of love that a marriage should be based on.'

Ann said, 'Mom, can I ask you something? What kind of feeling did you and Dad have for each other?'

'Don't drag us into it.'

'Why not? I want to know. If you say that it was love, what you call real love, then what happened to it? What's happened to your marriage? If this can happen to a marriage based on love, I am willing to take my chances on a marriage based on infatuation.'

Remembering the childish arguments, thinking back to that unpleasant period, Ann wished she had not written to her mother at all until she had had the baby. Oh well, she thought, at least she is not here to cluck over me. A letter doesn't do any harm. We can just have a good laugh over it and forget about it. Sending vitamin pills! She smiled and shook off her momentary feeling of oppression.

Ravi read the letter and said, 'Well, when do you plan to go? Shall I book your ticket or shall we write to your father to send you a PTA?'

She saw no trace of a smile on his face. 'I am not going anywhere, Ravi,' she said.

'Why not? How can you face the prospect of having a baby in this backward, uncivilized country?'

'There's no need to be sarcastic,' she said. 'And Mom didn't say all that. You are putting words in her mouth.'

'In her pen.'

'She is only anxious for me, that's all.'

'Does she think you are the first woman expecting a baby in this country?'

'Of course not,' Ann said. Everything Ravi said put her more and more on the defensive. 'But she is right, up to a point. You can't claim that the medical care available here can compare with what's available there.'

He barked a laugh. 'You don't know what you are talking about.'

'Oh I admit you probably have a few top-notch doctors who are as good as any in the U.S. But their services are not available to everyone.'

'The skill of top-notch doctors is not available to every slum-dweller there either. The point is that it's available to you. So what the hell of a difference does it make whether it's available to anyone else or not? And multivitamins, my God. If it wasn't so insulting it would be laughable. Can she honestly think multivitamin pills are not available here? How ignorant and provincial can a so-called educated woman be?'

Ann raised her voice to match his. 'All right, she is ignorant, provincial, a lot of other things. But at least in her stupid, bumbling way she cares about me. She wants to help me. Which is more than your mother ever did.'

'My mother is not under discussion here.'

'It's time she was under discussion. If you feel justified on the grounds of this one letter in calling my mother names, how much more reason I have to call your mother names. At least my mother was never rude and offensive to you. Your mother hasn't shown even that much decency. She has treated me as though I were an enemy. I came here as a stranger, a foreigner, nervous and scared. Did your mother, did any member of your precious family help make my adjustments to a new country easier? In fact they tried to make things as hard as they possibly could. When I was sick, instead of offering to cook something special for me, your mother was bitterly complaining how unreasonable I was that I didn't try to like Indian food. She even alleged that I was faking illness so I could get my way. Oh yes, I understood her perfectly and you knew I did. But you are such a coward you refused to stand up on my behalf.'

'That's enough, Ann.'

'No, let me say everything I want to say. I have held my silence too long. Take this.' She waved a hand. 'Even a casual acquaintance like Usha helped me set up house. Did one of your family lift a finger to help me?'

'You didn't ask for help.'

'This sort of help doesn't have to be asked for. It's given if you care enough.'

'If they had offered help you'd probably have felt that they were interfering.'

'Oh you have a pat excuse for everything they do or don't do. If you won't listen to any criticism of them, how can you expect me to sit here and listen to you sneer at my mother? Will you tell me that?'

'You don't have to sit and listen to anything. You are perfectly free to walk out. Or go back to your mother.'

Ann ran out of the room and slammed out of the house. Ravi shouted, 'Where do you think you are going at this time of the night?' but she didn't answer. She felt she had to go as far and as fast as she could, away from the house. She was angry, very angry, and only an expenditure of energy could calm her down.

Actually, her mother and Ravi had started out great friends. A neighbour who had invited Ravi for the weekend had been suddenly called out of town and had not been able to get in touch with him. She had gone, leaving a message and apologies with Ann's mother. Mrs Palmer had invited him for lunch and Ann had met him as she was spending the weekend at home. Mrs Palmer had been quite charmed by him and his first visit had been followed by several more. There had developed between them a friendly and affectionate relationship. Ravi did a lot of little things which were calculated to please a woman her age, standing up when she walked into a room, insisting on helping with washing up after a meal, never forgetting to ask about her arthritis, paying her extravagant compliments which she loved. And then overnight they had turned into bitter enemies because the unthinkable had happened and this charming foreigner had seduced her daughter away from her. Ann had always wondered how her mother could have been so blind. Anyone with much less perception would have seen what was happening and would not have been stunned as from a totally unexpected blow. Ann had not realized that her mother had been blind simply because she had never admitted the possibility of such a relationship developing between Ravi and her daughter. When she said that Ravi was a fine boy, or that he had such beautiful manners, she was admiring him in a slightly patronizing way. There was a phrase preceding such statements

which was implicit in her attitude. She meant that for a dark-skinned man from the third world, he was very charming and so on. It would never have occurred to her to be romantically inclined towards such a man, and she took it for granted that in this respect Ann had similar attitudes and tastes.

Ann admitted that Ravi's resentment of her mother had some justification. However, she had fought with her mother and demanded that she treat Ravi with at least ordinary politeness. In contrast to that, Ravi had never stood up to his mother. He could have said, 'Look, if you want me to stay here, you've got to stop being nasty to my wife,' but he hadn't said it. In fact what he had done was try to justify her atrocious behaviour.

When she returned Ravi said, 'Where did you go? I was so worried. I tried to look for you.'

'I just went for a walk,' she said.

'I shouldn't have got you upset, in your condition.'

'There's nothing wrong with my condition,' she snapped. She was not willing to accept an apology in this form. In fact she did not consider it an apology at all.

She went into the bedroom and started changing into her pajamas. The pale green curtains were drawn and one of the dark red raw-silk shaded bedside lamps had been turned on, casting a warm glow on the bed. The bed looked inviting. Ann briefly considered sleeping in the other bedroom but discarded the idea. She was not the sort to indulge in dramatic gestures.

She was already in bed, reading when Ravi came in.

'What's that you are reading?'

'Same book I was reading yesterday and the day before.'

'It's getting quite warm,' he said, pulling the curtain aside.

'Is it?'

'I hope the summer's not been too hot for you.'

'It hasn't. I am quite tough.' She kept her voice flat and without inflection.

He got into bed. 'Do you know I've never read Nehru's autobiography,' he said, 'It's like sightseeing in your own country. Something you always mean to do but never get around to doing. Maybe I should read it when you're finished with it.'

She didn't say anything.

'I finished my book yesterday and I don't feel like starting a new one.'

'Don't then.'

'Aren't you going to sleep?'

'Not till I finish this chapter.'

She was furious. Did he expect that acting as though nothing had happened would wipe out their argument? She felt miserable that it all mattered so little to him that he could simply turn away and go to sleep. She knew she wouldn't be able to sleep until they had made some effort to restore the harmony.

Finally she switched off the light and said, 'Ravi, please.'

He must have been awake, which meant that he must have been more troubled than she had thought. She felt the beginning of gladness as he instantly turned and held her.

'I am sorry darling,' he said, 'I had no right to take out on you what I felt about your mother's letter. You can't be held responsible for what she is. After all, I mustn't forget that you married me in the face of her opposition. What's the matter?'

She pulled back. 'Ravi, that's not the point at all.'

'What do you mean?'

'You have no cause to be so mercilessly critical of my mother. Whatever her shortcomings, she means well. I mean, all right, we find each other's relatives irritating. Even insufferable. But if our relationship is important to us, we will have to refrain from making unkind remarks about them to each other. After all, you can't think that I enjoy hearing such remarks about my mother.'

'All right, all right. You have made your point. I'll take care it doesn't happen again.'

He didn't take her in his arms again. He turned on his side and this time fell asleep quickly. She heard his regular breathing, and wondered whether she had merely succeeded in marking out an area of non-communication.

12

The heat struck with a malevolent intensity very late in the season. Ann felt listless and depressed by it, and by Ravi's

absent during the day now that he had started working. Usha was busy writing her thesis and came more often in the evenings. Ravi seemed to accept her now, for which Ann was happy. She didn't like keeping the two relationships mutually exclusive.

She kept telling herself that she really should start doing something but she had no idea what. She had no contacts as yet, and had not explored any possibilities. After finishing college she had taken special courses in education for linguistically and culturally disadvantaged children, and had later worked for the Department of Education preparing teaching materials for first and second grades. She did not know how exactly her training could be used here, and she knew that her lack of Marathi would stand in the way of her working in this particular field. Usha had said that she could teach in one of the many English-medium schools. 'They find it difficult to get good teachers' she said, 'and would jump at the chance of having you. I can inquire in Rasika's school if you are interested.' But somehow, after learning that such schools catered only to the moneyed and privileged children, she did not much feel like teaching there. She would prefer to teach poorer children who did not come from an educated background. It would be a greater challenge.

No matter what she planned to do, a working knowledge of Marathi was essential. She had stopped her lessons now, but practised diligently with the reading material and tapes her teacher had given her. However, after fast initial progress, she had reached a plateau and was discouraged to find herself stuck there.

She said to Usha one day, 'I thought pregnancy was supposed to make you feel happy and buoyant. Why do I feel so listless and depressed?'

'It's probably the heat. You will feel better once the heat breaks.'

'When will that be?'

'Early June, when the monsoon comes.'

Ann couldn't muster the energy to do her own shopping. The maidservant did most of it and Usha did the rest, taking Ann's list and bringing the shopping the next time she came. The only time Ann got out of the house was in the late afternoons when Ravi sometimes went for a walk.

One day dawned, bringing with it its early morning

sun the threat of the mounting heat of the day. Sometimes Ann felt that she couldn't possibly live through any more such days. Despite the unbroken brightness of the days, the atmosphere seemed breathless, as though there was in it a premonition of disaster, and though Ann was far from being superstitious, she still wondered later whether her premonition had any significance, whether something like extra-sensory perception existed.

She received a telegram that her father had died of a heart-attack. She read it over and over stupidly, and was not aware of it evoking any feeling at all. Then when she began to think and feel, her first thought was, 'Poor Mom, now she is all alone.' And finally her mind began to grasp the central fact—that Dad was dead, that death being irrevocable, she was never again to see him.

She never remembered him young. He did not possess the trim tall clean-cut appearance which allows some men to project a youthful image even in their middle age. He was tall, but he had always been overweight and flabby, and careless about his personal appearance. Her mother nagged him about his dandruff-sprinkled collar, or the way he sat with his knees wide apart, or the way he dribbled on the side of the toilet bowl while urinating. He must have had digestive troubles, because Ann remembered him, after dinner, belching and saying 'excuse me' under his breath quite often. Her mother complained about this too, and he said he couldn't help it, it was because of all the rich food she cooked. They went on sparring all the time. Occasionally when the family gathered together and Ann saw the discussions or the good-natured joshing that went on between her father and his other children, she always felt surprised and a little hurt, as though she had missed out on something that they had had. She never grew close to her father. She wondered whether he had been more the normal kind of father with the others, taking them to the zoo or the movies or romping with them, and whether, by the time she came along, he had simply run out of paternal enthusiasm.

Now suddenly she had an overwhelming feeling of lost opportunities. She had never got to know her father. She had talked history and current politics with him, but except for a few accidental glimpses, had not known anything about his personal life. He had not been a very happy man and even his

smile had a veneer of sadness. She felt guilty now that she had never tried to break through to his deepest thoughts, to be a friend to him. Perhaps there is always an element of guilt, she thought, in what children, after reaching adulthood, feel towards their parents. Guilt for being selfish, for not being considerate enough, for abandoning them to a lonely old age, guilt actually, for being young when they are old.

Her thoughts hovered also around the event of death itself. How had it happened? Did he have his heart attack at home or somewhere else? Did he die instantly or was he taken to a hospital? Was he conscious before death? She imagined him lying immobile, white-faced. She thought of the undertaker's men violating his body and shuddered. She thought of the time when from Tilak Bridge she had pointed to a fire on the banks of the Sarsa and asked Ravi what it was. He had told her it was someone being cremated. She had stood at the railing watching the flames, fascinated and repelled by the idea of a human body burning. It seemed to her unspeakably cruel to consign the body of someone you love, scant hours after his death, to fire, and to see it reduced to ashes before your eyes. Now she thought that it really made no difference whether you burned or buried a body. Either way you consigned it to oblivion. And why not? What else was to be done with a dead body? It was nothing. Unless you believed in resurrection, which Ann hadn't since reaching the age of understanding. She thought now that the alternatives were belief in rebirth or belief in the total irrevocable destruction of a living being, which made nothing of the whole endeavour that is human life.

She wordlessly handed Ravi the telegram that evening.

He said, 'Oh my God, you poor darling.'

In his arms she wept. He only held her, knowing that he was powerless to do anything else to help her, acknowledging the necessity for explicit sorrow. Usually tearful women embarrassed, irritated and even disgusted him. That was one of the things he liked about Ann. He had told her once that she was almost like a man, she hardly ever cried. Now Ann was grateful to him for letting her cry. She relaxed and then suddenly tautened under his caressing hand, hungry for his touch. He felt her need and responded with his own and they made love, she feeling faintly ashamed but also exultant at this blatant assertion of life.

COME RAIN

Then he made her rest. When he called her for dinner she protested that she was not hungry but he insisted that she must eat for the little fellow. When she sat down at the table she discovered that she was hungry after all. After they had eaten he undressed her and made her get into bed, and there was a sweet feeling of warmth and security in being cherished in this manner. Ann thought, lying there, that this was what marriage was all about. After you had outgrown your mother, only a husband or wife could, in a crisis, stand in her stead. This made her think of her mother. Did she feel inconsolably lonely without Dad? Actually, her occasional bitter and cynical comments about men in general and her husband in particular were far from being an expression of cynicism. They only expressed her frustration that her relationship with him fell short of her expectation. Like a true fighter, she never gave up. She taunted with cutting sarcasm, raved shrewishly or dissolved in tears. It all meant only one thing. She was issuing an appeal for help. Ann felt pity for her mother because she fought to salvage something that was beyond saving. She had never learned how to let go, and ended up losing what she most wanted to keep.

She could not sleep most of the night. Ravi offered to take the next day off but she told him she would be all right by herself. Ravi's mother and Mohini came to see her and spent some time with her while Ravi was not home. Ravi's mother asked her if she might not like to go and stay with them for a few days, so she wouldn't be alone during the day. Ann was touched by the offer and declined in a way that, she hoped, would not hurt her mother-in-law's feelings. She felt that she would rather be alone and think her own thoughts, than give banal responses to banal comments from people who came to see her.

Everyone said that it was a pity she couldn't be with her mother at such a time. Ann felt, however, that it was just as well that she wasn't with her mother. The first letter she received from her mother reinforced the feeling. It was subtly worded to evoke guilt which anyway lay near the surface.

'I miss you so much,' she wrote, 'and keep thinking of all the fun things we used to do. But of course you must be happy and busy in your own life, and I mustn't complain, but it would have been so much easier to face this lonely and difficult time if you had been with me.'

Usha said, 'What will your mother do now?'

'Luckily she has enough money to allow her to live independently in a small apartment.'

'She won't go to live with one of your brothers?'

Ann smiled and shook her head.

Her mother wrote, 'Of course I know I'll have to give up the house. John and Margaret went apartment hunting and have found several places which are convenient and practical but so empty without memories.'

Ann could imagine that the process of rearranging and contracting her life was painful for her mother.

Usha said, 'And what happens if she falls ill?'

'What happens when anyone who lives alone falls ill? They manage somehow. And if she becomes infirm and unable to care for herself, then she will have to be put in an old people's home. I know it sounds heartless to you, but in the context of today's American society it's inevitable.'

Yet, despite the rationalization, Ann kept feeling sorry for her mother when she thought of her living alone in a small flat.

Ravi seemed strangely unwilling to talk about her father's death at all, veering her away if she touched on the subject, as though he had a superstitious dread of discussing death.

One day she received a letter from her brother John saying that their father's death was not all that sudden, as he had been under treatment for angina for several years. John had discovered this after talking to the doctor who had been treating him, and who had been called when Ann's mother had found her husband dead in his bed. Ann was amazed that none of them had known about it, and she wept when she thought of her father who had not felt free even to share with his family the fact that he was quite seriously ill.

Ravi said, 'You mustn't cry so much, Ann. Think of your condition.'

'Do you think crying is something you can stop at will?'

'You must make an effort. Otherwise you will make yourself ill. Think of the baby. You must take care of yourself for his sake.'

She said bitterly, 'Dad really picked an inconvenient time to die, didn't he? He should have thought of my condition.' Then she started crying afresh when she thought that her father would never see her baby.

The most trivial things irritated her. Some mornings she was

relieved to see Ravi go off to work so he wouldn't nag her to do something and not just mope. But directly he left she longed to have him back. She was filled with panic at the thought of having to spend the day alone, especially as she did not feel like doing any of the things that she used to do to fill the hours. She welcomed his return with gladness but then during the evening something would happen that set off a senseless quarrel again.

One day he was leafing through a magazine and came across a pageful of photographs of some new starlet. Remarking that she was quite beautiful, he passed the magazine to Ann to see.

She said, 'She has such a vacuous expression.'

'I am not talking about her expression, just look at her features. They are so finely drawn and so delicate.'

'How can you call features beautiful without referring to the expression? Beauty must evoke a response in you.'

'This face does in me.'

'Then you are welcome to look at it. Don't expect me to admire it. I know why you started this conversation— to make the point that she is pretty and I am not. You are always going out of your way to make me feel big and clumsy and ugly. Well if you think Indian girls are so pretty you should have married one of them.'

'Ann, for God's sake—'

Suddenly she was horrified at herself 'Oh I am sorry Ravi. I don't know what possesses me. I don't want to fight with you.'

When something like this happened, the next day she could hardly believe that she had let herself be so upset over such a trifle. She told herself that Ravi was right. She must take herself in hand. It worried her that she was not able to keep cool in the face of such insignificant irritants.

She sometimes blamed her own erratic and irrational behaviour on the heat, but was honest enough to admit that the climate could not offer the sole explanation, or justification. But then why was she turning into the kind of snrewish, nagging, tearful woman that she had always despised, and helpless to do anything about it? Only Usha seemed to be an anchor. Just her presence, and the chance to talk to her, made Ann feel good for hours after one of her occasional visits.

By the end of May Ann began to feel that the heat was never going to let up. There was no relief from it even at night. It had turned cloudy and oppressive, and despite a fan, she awoke

sweating several times during the night, waking up tired the next morning because she hadn't had enough rest.

One afternoon when she was trying to goad herself into planning a more interesting meal than she had cooked in a long time, the sky suddenly darkened. The air was very still, with a feeling of expectancy in it. Then there was a blinding flash of lightning followed by a crash of thunder, and the sky opened up. Ann went out and stood on the front steps watching the rain. After a while she walked to the gate. The large plogging drops felt cool and healing to her parched skin. The relief from the heat was almost numbing. Her nostrils filled with the scent which emanated from the earth like a sigh of satiety after prolonged deprivation. People were scurrying for shelter. The lashing fury of the rain stripped leaves from the trees and flattened small plants to the ground. In a few minutes the street became a raging torrent. From time to time lightning streaked across the metallic blue-black of the sky, and thunder crashed in waves upon waves in a catharsis of pent-up emotion. Ann marvelled at the destructive force of the life-giving rain, and began to understand why the Hindu pantheon had a god of destruction and death along with a god of creation.

Suddenly she heard a faint mewing. At first she was not sure she had heard it. Then she heard it again, and looking around, saw a scrawny black and white kitten trying to find shelter under a bush. She picked it up, saying, 'You poor wet thing.' It was so tiny it almost fitted in the palm of her hand. She could feel its heart beating wildly. She carried it into the kitchen and patted it gently with a towel. Then she warmed some milk and poured it into a saucer. The kitten wouldn't drink while she held it, remaining tense in her hand, claws out and spread-eagled.

She put it down and went to change out of her dripping clothes. By the time she came back the kitten had drunk some of the milk and was wandering about, exploring the kitchen.

Ravi arrived late because of the rain. He had waited until the fury of the storm was spent, and then had become wet and mud-spattered driving his scooter.

He went to bathe and change and coming out of the bathroom said, 'What are all the wet clothes in the bathroom? Did you get

in it.'
for?'

COME RAIN

'It was such a magnificent storm, after all the heat.'

'You could catch a bad cold.'

'Oh darling, don't fuss. It was so glorious, and I felt so wonderful. Don't spoil it now.'

'Sometimes you can be so childish,' he said, but he smiled and kissed her. He patted her abdomen and said, 'How's the little fellow doing?'

'Are you going to be disappointed if it's a girl? You insist on saying little fellow.'

'It's just a way of avoiding saying 'it'. I won't be disappointed even if you give birth to a broom.'

Ann burst out laughing. 'Why a broom, particularly?'

'Because that's what certain characters in children's stories deliver.'

'How do they manage that?'

'Well, you know, they don't actually deliver them. There's this king. He has two queens. One's his favourite and the other he doesn't like.'

'Why does he marry her then, if he doesn't like her?'

'Ann, you can't apply logic to children's stories.'

'I am sorry. Go on.'

'The favourite queen is having a baby. The unfavourite one—who is mean and revengeful and obviously deserves being disliked—plots to have one of her trusted maids put on the favourite queen's staff. This maid is the one who attends the delivery and has the newborn baby spirited away and puts in its place a broom wrapped up nicely in a cloth. When this news is conveyed to the king who is hopefully waiting for an heir, he is furious with the favourite queen and demotes her immediately to the unfavourite status.'

'What happens to the baby?'

• 'They hand it to somebody to kill but at the last moment he can't bring himself to do it. He puts the baby in the basket and floats the basket on the river. Someone finds and brings up the baby. And then when he grows up he is recognized as a king because of course he carries the mark of a king on the palm of his hand.'

'How fascinating. I must get myself some books of children's stories to read. That might be more interesting than trying to struggle through adult books with my sketchy knowledge of Marathi.'

She served dinner—chicken and a vegetable casserole and steamed bread.

Ravi said, 'Is it some special day that I should have remembered?'

'It's a special day, but nothing that you should have remembered.'

'May I ask what?'

'You may not.'

In spite of his protests, Ann adopted the kitten. She called it Fluff because, she said, it was far from fluffy. 'You know, like you call a bald man curly.'

'Perfectly logical,' Ravi said.

13

It was mid June and colleges reopened and Shri was back in Sangampur. Ann was working in the garden one day when she heard him say, 'What are you doing?'

'Oh, Shri. You startled me. I am trying to do some gardening, as you can see. I had put in some flower seed, now I am doing the transplanting.'

'Don't you have a *mali* or someone to help?'

'Our neighbour lent me her *mali* for a few days to do the digging and made the beds. Actually I could have done it, but I have no implements. I went to ask her if I could borrow them, and she was quite shocked that I intended to do the work myself. She immediately asked her *mali* to accompany me and do whatever I needed. She just wouldn't take a no.'

'Here, can I help with that?'

Ann handed him a bunch of snapdragon seedlings and showed him where to plant them.

He said, 'I forget that you come from a country where people do all these sort of jobs themselves. Here if you are rich enough

to own a house and a garden, you are rich enough to afford servants.'

'I like working in the garden. It helps pass the time, and the garden looks so much better after being cleared of all the rubbish and weeded. Now when all these flowers come up, it will look really pretty. There, now let me just water the bed, then we'll go in. Do you have flowers around your house?'

He smiled 'We are not a people who set any value on beautifying our surroundings. The only criterion we apply to anything is utility. My mother has a basil plant which she worships, and a few marigolds and a jasmine, which provide flowers for the god.'

Ann said, 'Now I think we deserve a cup of coffee for all the hard work, don't you?'

He hesitated. 'Look, you don't have to invite me in if you have something else to do.'

'I have absolutely nothing to do other than drinking coffee with you.'

'You don't mind my coming when Ravi's not home?'

She laughed. 'Of course not. Why should I?'

'Well, you might--I mean --as a matter of fact, I came just now because I wanted to see you - alone.'

Ann was mystified. She said mildly 'In that case, hadn't you better come in?'

Finally he came in, slipped off his chappals just inside the door and went into the living room.

'Sit down,' Ann said. 'I'll get the coffee.'

'No no, please. I don't want anything.'

He wouldn't look at her and she saw that he would continue sitting there in acute embarrassment unless she took the initiative.

• 'Do let me make some coffee. Why don't you come to the kitchen?'

By the time they were through drinking the coffee, Ann had succeeded in putting him at his ease. She said, 'Now. What was it you wanted to see me about?'

'I came to apologize for my atrocious behaviour on the day of your party.'

'What are you talking about?'

'You practically asked for an invitation to visit my family's home and I wouldn't give it to you. It was unforgivable. It's just

that I didn't think you could possibly be interested in visiting my primitive home and my simple rough parents. But I had no right to think that. It was an insult to you, in a way. And to them, also, because it meant that I was ashamed of them, ashamed of having you meet them. But that's not so, really.'

He was so intense that she almost smiled. She said, 'Let it go, Shri. Forget it.'

He nodded. 'Then sometime, will you come to our village and visit my family?'

'I would be delighted to.'

'Thank you.'

He lapsed into silence. She thought he was a strange man, capable of emotional intensity underneath his quite mild exterior. She was surprised to see that he continued to sit there, although he seemed to have nothing more to say.

She said, 'Tell me about your family. Who all is there?'

'My father and mother. I have two older sisters who are married, and two brothers and a sister who are younger.'

'What does your father do?'

'He and my mother cultivate the land. They also have a few cows and sell the milk. Sometimes when there's not enough work on our own farm, my mother works on someone else's farm for daily wages. That's what my sister does too. My brothers go to school.'

'Your sister doesn't?'

'She was in school, but after passing out of the sixth standard she was needed to work and earn.'

'And how long will your brothers continue school?'

'They are both in high school now. If possible, I want to bring them here and give them a college education.'

'What about your sister? Why couldn't she continue with her education?'

'I told you.'

'That's just an excuse. If your family needs her to earn, they would also need your brothers to earn, wouldn't they?'

But they can become educated and get a higher-paying job. She can't.

'Why not?'

'Because there are no jobs for an educated girl in our village. And if she became too highly-educated, it would be impossible to get her married.'

COME RAIN

‘Why?’

‘Ann, I know this must sound stupid and bigoted to you. In our community, at the socio-economic level at which we are and the rural area where we live, girls don’t go to school more than a couple of years, if at all. An educated girl would be frowned upon by prospective bridegrooms. I know it’s all wrong, but no single person can buck the whole system.’

‘It seems to me that somebody’s got to start fighting the system, otherwise it will never change.’

‘I agree. But I don’t have the courage for it when it means victimizing someone else for the sake of my convictions. If I insist on sending her to school and then she doesn’t get married, I am the one she will blame.’

It seemed to Ann that the girl herself should have the choice to do what she wanted. If she took responsibility for her own life, she wouldn’t then blame anyone else.

They had finished their coffee and Ann said, ‘I wonder where I can buy some gardening tools.’

‘I’ll take you to a shop if you want.’

‘Right now?’

‘Why not?’

‘I’d be very grateful, if you can spare the time.’

‘I am free.’

‘Will you please wait a second while I change into something respectable?’

She was wearing a loose knee-length dress which had pleats falling from a yoke and which served well as a maternity dress. Now she changed into a sari. She saw from Shri’s expression that he approved of it.

She said, ‘Do you think I look all right in a sari?’

‘You look very nice in a sari.’ But he avoided looking at her and seemed embarrassed that she should ask him such a question.

He took her to a shop where, with his help, she bought some implements, a length of garden hose and some vegetable seed.

They hailed a rickshaw and he said, ‘I’ll take you home.’

‘That’s not necessary, Shri. unless you are going to stay and have dinner with us.’

‘I can’t today. I have some students coming for a tuition.’

‘In that case I will drop you at your place. Get in.’

‘No, no. I don’t live far from here. I’ll walk.’

She let him go his own way. Ravi arrived home while she was paying off the rickshaw.

'And where have you been?' he asked

'Shopping. Look at what I've got. Wouldn't it be lovely to have home-grown vegetables? I can almost taste them already.'

'Ann, you know you shouldn't run around in rickshaws. And I wish you'd go easy on the gardening. You might strain yourself.'

'Oh what rot. A healthy woman can lead a perfectly normal life throughout pregnancy. Not much that she does during her ordinary daily routine can harm the baby, otherwise a majority of children would be born defective or be aborted.'

She told him about Shri's visit. 'He is sweet, but a bit weird. You know, he has the most unexpected responses to things.'

When Shri came again a few days later Ravi said, 'I think he's in love with you.'

'What nonsense, Ravi. He's only seen me a few times. He doesn't even know me very well.'

'You don't have to know someone very well to have a crush on them.'

'Besides, look at me all big and clumsy with my belly sticking out a mile. What man would look at me twice?'

'Some men feel attracted to pregnant women. I read it somewhere.'

She laughed. 'I still don't believe it, but if it's true, do you mind?'

'Shri having a crush on you? Not at all, why should I?'

Finally Ann began to suspect that Ravi might be right. However, Shri was always very proper. He never by a word or gesture transgressed his role as her husband's friend. And she appreciated his company during the day when she was alone.

Sometimes when he had time ~~he took her sightseeing~~. She was amused by the difference in the two men's attitudes.

She had once said to Ravi, 'I wish you weren't so apologetic about everything. Even if it's dirty and shabby and poor, it's your country, and you should have some pride in it.'

'This country has nothing to be proud of. What are you going to take pride in, overpopulation, inefficiency, corruption filth?'

'What country doesn't have something that its citizens are proud of?'

'I don't think Americans need to be ashamed of anything.'

'Oh God, you say that only because you lived there as a visitor, an outsider. You only saw the good side. What about our astronomical defence budget and our search for better and more effective weapons with which to destroy the human race? And our support of dictatorial regimes which are subjecting their populations to unspeakable repression and cruelty, while paying lip-service to the democratic way of life, and the arrogance which permits our CIA to interfere in other countries' internal affairs? I could go on with the list until I ran out of breath. Compared to all this, dirt and poverty and inefficiency don't matter, you see. What matters is whether a country allows its citizens to live in dignity and contentment.'

'You think people who live in that zopadpatti live in dignity and contentment?'

'They probably do. Oh I admit they should have better living conditions. But they have something—an inner security, perhaps a stable family life, or religious faith—I don't know what—that prevents their physical environment from killing their spirit. I used to work with slum kids for a while, and the resentment, bitterness, apathy, despair you had to deal with almost unnerved me. I used to get gooseflesh walking along a street feeling hostile stares following me. Here I don't have that feeling. These people seem involved with their own lives. Even the kids—they stare at me with curiosity, some of them jeer at me, but they also give friendly smiles, wave back if I wave at them. They respond as fellow human beings.'

Ravi laughed. 'I think you have a very fertile imagination. I don't think they are as friendly as you think they are. It's one of my nightmares that all the poor and oppressed people in India will one day rise up in revolt and massacre the small minority of *haves* to which I belong.'

Shri, on the other hand, almost defiantly exposed her to the things and places Ravi tried to avoid. He took her to the poorest and sleaziest zopadpattis by the river, the red-light district, a colony of hermaphrodites, old decaying parts of town which had mildewed tenements, narrow roads lined with human excreta, tacky shops.

Then he would say, 'What do you think of it?'

'What's there to think?'

'Does it disgust you, depress you?'

'Some of it disgusts me, but it doesn't depress me particularly.'

'That's because you are not involved.'

'Maybe.'

Once he asked her, almost belligerently, 'After seeing more and more of this country, don't you regret coming to live here?'

'No I don't, Shri.'

'Because you think all this poverty and dirt won't touch you, you can live apart from it?'

'Not necessarily. Why are you cross-questioning me like this? What are you trying to get at?'

'I just want to understand what could possibly motivate you to leave a country like America and come and settle here. The fact that Ravi wanted to come back?'

'That wasn't the only reason.'

'Then why? Why did you want to come here? You are not a missionary.'

'Missionaries are not the only people who came here.'

'No. Traders came, and conquerors, scholars, hippies, people looking for spiritual solace. But you don't seem to fit into any of these categories.'

She said lightly, 'Don't be too sure.'

14

Ann turned off the tape recorder to open the door for Ravi.

He said, 'It's weird, listening to you having a conversation with a disembodied voice.'

'Since you refuse to talk to me in Marathi, I have to be satisfied with a disembodied voice.'

He put his briefcase down on a chair and kissed her. 'Sometimes,' she said, 'I feel so discouraged. I think I'll never learn enough to communicate satisfactorily in Marathi.'

'I don't know why you bother with it anyway.'

COME RAIN

On her way to the kitchen, she stopped in her tracks. 'Ravi, I am surprised at you. You are the one who kept telling me that people don't talk to me because they don't know enough English. And now—'

'I didn't really mean that you should dedicate half your day to studying Marathi. Learning just enough to get by should be your aim.'

'How can you say that? Are you seriously suggesting that I remain a perpetual foreigner here? How would you have felt in the U.S. if you didn't know much English?'

'I had to know enough because I wanted to study in that language.'

'But suppose you didn't. Suppose you just wanted to live there. Would you have been happy to be able to talk—really talk—to just a few people who knew your language?'

'A lot of people live happily like that.'

'I couldn't.'

He went to have a wash and then followed her into the kitchen where she was putting on some coffee.

She said, 'Guess who I ran into—Mohini.'

'Where?'

'Near here. So I invited her to come home.'

He frowned. 'What was she doing here? It's pretty far from home.'

'So what? Honestly, the way you keep tabs on girls in this country.'

'What did she have to say?'

Nothing special. We just chatted. I asked her what she wanted to do, now that she has finished her B.A. She said she had no plans. It all depended on what your father and mother said. So I asked her what she would like to do and she said she didn't really know.'

'Marry, what else?'

'She's quite good at her studies, isn't she? Wouldn't she like to go on and do her M.A. or something?'

'How would I know?'

'Why don't you talk to her and ask her?'

He seemed surprised at her suggestion. 'Why should I? She is perfectly capable of taking her own decisions. Actually, I don't know her that well. She was pretty small when I left—only twelve. And after seven years away I don't feel I can sort of play the part of older brother and adviser.'

Ann brought the coffee pot and a plate of cookies to the dining table. She had tried to persuade Ravi to have the evening meal as soon as he came home from work. But he preferred to have coffee and a snack and then go for a walk perhaps or read or listen to music, and eat dinner between eight and nine.

Ann asked, 'What was Mohini like as a little girl?'

'Mostly quite amenable and even-tempered. But she had an obstinate streak in her. If Aai didn't let her do something she had set her heart on, she would have sulking bouts that could last for days. She wouldn't talk to anyone, she would appear only at mealtime and then eat as little as possible, cry all the time.' He chuckled. 'I remember her once using this method of wearing down Aai's resistance to her going on a school trip. The trip was to Karnataka, and would last for six days. Aai had said she was too young to go but she had set her heart on it. So she went into one of her sulking bouts. Finally Aai was convinced that Mohini could carry on like this indefinitely, and she gave in.'

'Well, good for Mohini.'

'Although I thought her behaviour childish, I secretly envied her for having a weapon that enabled her to get around Aai.'

Ravi was still wondering what Mohini could possibly be doing in this part of town

Ann said, 'She complimented me on my Marathi. And said she would like to learn how to make these cookies and would come again soon.'

'It all sounds highly suspicious,' he said, laughing. 'Something fishy about a sister-in-law paying you compliments.'

Although Ravi was joking, Ann herself began to wonder, when Mohini repeated her visit twice in quick succession, what motivated these visits. During the third visit, Mohini seemed tense and nervous, and, when Ann asked her if something was bothering her, over-quick in her denial.

'If there is something, if I can help in any way, you can feel free to tell me, you know,' Ann said. 'That's what friends are for.'

She was dismayed to see Mohini start to cry.

She said, 'I didn't mean to pry, Mohini. If you don't feel like talking, please don't.'

'It's not that,' Mohini said. Then she disclosed what Ann had by now begun to suspect. There was a man whom she met

secretly at a place which was sufficiently secluded and conveniently located in the general vicinity of Ravi's house. Now that college was over, 'I'm going to Ravi's' offered an acceptable excuse, even though eyebrows were raised at her sudden friendship with Ann.

Ann said, 'And I thought it was my charm that brought you here.'

To her consternation this only produced a fresh bout of tears. She was watching Mohini a little helplessly and thought suddenly, 'Why, she is beautiful. This was what was lacking.' She had always thought Mohini was a pretty girl, with a trim five foot two figure, a small oval face framed by luxuriant black hair, and brown eyes fringed, like Ravi's, by curling black eyelashes. But she always looked as though life had not touched her at all. She had the freshness and innocence which looks winning on a child's face but which made her face expressionless and bland.

Finally Ann said, 'Oh, I was only kidding, Mohini. Don't cry.' Mohini's crying slowly subsided.

Ann said, 'I take it your parents don't know about this man.' 'Of course not.'

'Tell me about him. Who is he?'

'His name is Prem Shivdasani. He is a final year student in the engineering college.'

'Where did you meet him?'

'At the boat races. One of my friends has a brother who was taking part and we went to watch. Prem and my friend's brother were rowing in the same boat and they won that race. Later they took us to eat ice cream. That's how I met him.'

'And you felt attracted to him?'

'Yes.'

Ann saw that information had to be extracted painfully and would not be given freely.

She said, 'So now what? How long can you just go on meeting him secretly?'

'How else can I meet him? My parents would never let me go out with him. With anyone, actually, but least of all with him.'

'Why least of all with him?'

'He is a Sindhi.'

'So?'

Mohini looked at her pityingly. 'You don't understand,' she said. 'He doesn't belong to our caste.'

Ann wanted to say, 'So what?' but she said instead, 'I see.' Then she said, 'What exactly is your relationship? Do you want to marry him?'

'Yes.'

'Then why don't you just tell your parents?'

Mohini lifted reproachful eyes.

'They will just kill me.'

'Come now Mohini, nobody is going to kill you. They will shout, threaten. But you are of age. Once they are convinced that your mind is made up, they will give in. The only question is, is your decision firm?'

'Yes. But you don't know my parents.'

'What can they do, Mohini? What are you afraid of? That they'll cut off your inheritance?'

'I don't care about that.'

'What, then?'

'They may lock me up.'

'Nonsense. Nobody does such things in this day and age.'

'They may go to see Prem and his family and create a scene and insult them.'

'Warn them what to expect. Do his parents know about this?'

'Yes.'

'Do they approve of it?'

'Not exactly, but they won't stand in his way.'

'There you are then. If they stand by you, you have nothing to fear.'

Mohini was silent for a long time. Then she said, not looking at Ann, 'I thought if Ravi could talk to Appa and Aai—'

'Why don't you ask him to?'

'Ann, will you talk to him? I am afraid to. He may not approve.'

Ann sighed and said, 'All right Mohini, I'll talk to Ravi. But you'll have to tell me more about this boy, and Ravi will want to meet him before he can talk to your parents.'

Prem's family had been merchants and traders in Karachi. At the time of partition they thought they would run before the holocaust started but they didn't run soon enough. They could not sell their property and simply had to leave behind houses and shops and merchandise worth lakhs. They were able to salvage some cash and gold, but were robbed on the way and

arrived in India almost penniless and minus two members of their party who had succumbed to some fever. They lived in a refugee camp for a few weeks and slowly made their way to New Delhi, where Prem's grandfather heard about a neighbour of theirs who was in Sangampur in Maharashtra, and was doing well. Prem's grandfather wrote to an approximate address he was able to obtain and received a reply asking him to come to Sangampur. The friend helped set them up in the cloth business. Starting with a small portable shack of the sort that were mushrooming all over the city, Prem's grandfather and father built up quite a prosperous business. They now owned a swank cloth shop on Shivaji Road which was the most prestigious street for cloth shops, and a ready-made clothes shop in the cantonment area, which Prem's uncle ran.

Prem's parents lived in a three-room apartment in one of the quieter and cheaper residential areas in the cantonment. His father talked about building a house in one of the more fashionable new colonies towards the hills, but Prem had told Mohini that he had been talking about it for twenty years and would talk for another twenty. They liked the neighbourhood they were in, and Prem said his father could never bring himself to spend the kind of money that would be required for buying a plot and building even a reasonably small house.

When Ann talked to Ravi, he said his parents would never give their consent.

'How can you tell before even talking to them?'

'Because I know. First of all, they will be furious when they learn that she has been meeting him clandestinely.'

'What else could she do when she knew that she would never be allowed to meet him openly?'

'Anyhow, it's probably just an infatuation. She'll get over it.'

Ann was shocked. 'That's not fair, Ravi. You've got to treat her like an adult, trust her judgement.'

'What judgement can a girl that age have? She's not comparable to an American girl, Ann. She's never met any man. He's probably the first young man who has paid her any attention, so she imagines herself in love with him. She has only known him for a few months. How can she make up her mind in such a short time that she wants to marry him?'

'You didn't know me much longer before you asked me to marry you.'

'That was an entirely different situation. We were together for long periods at a time, sometimes for whole days, which gave us a chance to get to know each other. What could Mohini learn about a man whom she sees only occasionally during short secret meetings? In fact, it's probably the secrecy of the thing that lends glamour to the relationship.'

'That's easy to counteract. Let her see him openly and she will find out that what she mistook for love was really nothing more than friendship, regard, physical attraction, what have you.'

'That's out of the question.'

'Why?'

'Ann, you know very well that sort of thing is just not done here. If a girl is seen around with a man and then doesn't marry him, her reputation's ruined forever.'

'Quite a conundrum. If a girl can't meet a man openly, she cannot get to know him enough to decide whether she ought to marry him or not. But she cannot be allowed to meet him openly because it will ruin her reputation in case she decides not to marry him. So what's the way out? That she give up the man she half-knows to marry a man she knows not at all, whom her parents have chosen for her?'

'It's not as ridiculous as you are trying to make it sound.'

'I agree. It's not ridiculous, because it's inhuman.'

'Now you are over-reacting, Ann.'

'I am surprised at you Ravi, I really am. Are you seriously suggesting that Mohini give up this boy whom she at least thinks she loves, and marry someone else? How can you condemn him as unsuitable without even meeting him?'

'What can possibly be accomplished by my meeting him? Whatever he is, Aai and Appa will never agree to the marriage.'

'But if you like him, think he would make Mohini a good husband, then you can at least try to persuade them.'

'It won't do any good.'

'Ravi, please. You've at least got to meet him, for Mohini's sake.'

'All right. Although I fail to see why you are getting so excited about the whole business.'

Prem Shivdasani was a very tall man, almost six feet, with an *engaging smile and humorous light brown eyes*.

'Will you have tea or coffee?' Ann asked him.

COME RAIN

'Anything that's convenient.'

'When someone gives you a choice, it's because they expect you to exercise it,' she said with mock severity.

'All right, tea then.'

Ravi and Mohini were both silent and uncomfortable. Ann said, 'Mohini told me about your family's hair-raising escape from Pakistan.'

He smiled. 'I have only heard about it. I wasn't even born then.'

'Of course.'

'Sometimes I wish I had been part of it. It all sounds so exciting. But I expect I wouldn't have thought so if I had been there.'

Ravi said, suddenly, 'What kind of engineer are you?'

'Civil.'

'What are your plans?'

'I am not absolutely sure yet, but I would like to try for a job on one of the dam projects, or something of that order. I don't think I want to live in a city and build houses.'

'I see. Are you the first person in your family to become so highly educated?'

'Yes.'

'Are you the eldest?'

'Yes. I have a younger sister and two brothers.'

'Are you responsible for their education?'

'No. My father has enough money to send them to college.'

'Have you told your parents about Mohini?'

'Yes. They have met her.'

'What do they think of the idea of your marrying her?'

'They are naturally a little disappointed that she is not of our community, but they wouldn't stand in the way if I say I want to marry her. They liked her.'

'You know of course that my parents will never agree to this marriage.'

'Mohini has told me so.'

'In that case what will you do?'

'It will be entirely up to her. I want to marry her.'

Ann said, after Mohini and Prem had left, 'Well?'

'I don't like him. He's too slick, too sure of himself.'

'I like the fact that he knows his mind so well.'

'You can see why Mohini fell for him. He's very good-looking.'

Ann started laughing.

'Did I say something funny?'

'Oh darling, you sounded so much like Mom, I had a sense of *deja vu*. That's exactly what she said about you. You can't condemn someone because he's good-looking.'

'It's not just his looks, it's everything. He just didn't give the impression of a good solid man—the kind I would like to see my sister marry.'

'Unless you have some specific—'

'I have one specific objection. He's out to get himself a wife from a rich, socially highly-placed family.'

'That's not fair, Ravi. They are by no means paupers. And—not that I think it matters that much—they can't be very low down on the scale as far as social status is concerned.'

'Cloth merchants! And refugees! Who knows what sort of background the family had. Here they can pass themselves off as anything and nobody will know any better.'

'I just can't believe you are saying all these things. I would have thought you incapable of such bigotry.'

'You don't know the social setup here, Ann. You can't just judge everything by American norms. In any case, why are we arguing about all this? It's not our business.'

'It is our business. Mohini is your sister and you had promised to talk to your parents about this.'

'If I thought the boy suitable, but I don't.'

'Then there's no point in talking about it any more, because obviously you had made up your mind before you even met Prem.'

She didn't refer to the matter again and he took it that it had been dropped. Then one day he came back from work raging.

'Ann, after we had decided to drop the subject of Mohini's marriage, how could you take it upon yourself to go and talk to Appa about it?'

His gray eyes flashed real anger.

'First of all, we had not decided anything of the sort. We had simply dropped our argument because there was no possibility of our seeing eye to eye. Which is not the same thing.'

'You are only quibbling. In any case, that's not the point at issue. Your poking your nose into this is inexcusable interference. I just can't begin to understand how you could have thought that it would be tolerated.'

COME RAIN

'I am just as much a member of this family as you are, and have as much right to interfere' as you call it, in its affairs. Mohini appealed to us for help, and since you refused to give it, I felt it was up to me to try. I thought Appa would be more reasonable than Aai, that's why I chose to talk to him. It seems I over-estimated him. Here, why don't you sit down and have your coffee?'

'I don't want coffee.'

Ann shrugged. She sat down at the table and started sipping from her cup. Ravi was still seething.

She said, 'Did you happen to go there today?'

'Appa called me at the office and asked me to go and see him. When I went there he only told me to see to it that my wife kept her nose out of their business. He said if I could not manage to control you, he would not be responsible for the consequences.'

Ann almost smiled. 'You can tell your father that a wife is a human being, not a thing to be controlled and ordered about. And I shall damn well poke my nose into Mohini's affairs, with her permission.'

Ravi looked at her a long time, finally sat down and started drinking his coffee.

'Ann, I can understand your feelings. But you've got to understand that social conditions are quite different here. In a mixed marriage like this, the couple gets cut off from both families. This puts a tremendous strain on their relationship which not many people can withstand. Mohini will have to make endless adjustments and still may not be able to get along with Prem's family. Then if she can't fall back on her family, she will have a really hard time of it.'

'In which case Ravi, your family can stand by her and make things easier for her. You talk so much about social conditions being different. But you can't feel that they should be perpetuated. So if someone has the guts to choose a marriage partner outside their caste or community or religion, why shouldn't they be encouraged instead of deterred? And you can't tell me it's for their own good. You always have to grant that people know what their own good consists of, allow them to take their own risks. Don't you see?'

Ravi kept shaking his head.

When Mohini came to see her, Ann said, 'I am sorry Mohini. I probably made things more difficult for you by butting in. What are you going to do now?'

'I want to marry him.'

'You are quite aware of all the pressures your parents will try to use to dissuade you?'

'Yes.' Mohini gave a crooked smile which turned into a grimace as she started crying. **'They are using them already.'**

'Well, if you are absolutely sure in your mind, then go ahead.'

'I am sure. I can't let Prem down now.'

Ann gave a brief smile. **'That's not sufficient reason to marry, you know. If you have any doubts at all, you should back out. It's better to let him down now than to rush into a marriage that you may regret.'**

'I am as sure as I will ever be.'

Mohini and Prem were married by a registrar. None of her family attended the ceremony except Ann. Ann tried reasoning with Ravi that once Mohini had made up her mind to marry Prem, it was childish to refuse to attend the wedding just because she was marrying someone he didn't approve of.

He only remarked sourly, **'If the marriage doesn't work out, Aai and Appa will blame you.'**

15

Ann was amazed to find that Ravi seriously believed that her help and encouragement was the most important factor to push Mohini into this marriage. He was sure that it was not going to last and he could not forgive Ann her part in it. Equally, she could not condone his tradition-bound attitude.

She said, **'Even if you feel that Mohini is making a terrible mistake, all you can legitimately do is try to dissuade her. It is unethical to try to browbeat or terrorize or blackmail her into submission.'**

Ravi said, **'Any action is justifiable so long as it is for the good of the person concerned.'**

COME RAIN

'When a person is an adult, nobody else has the right to decide what is or is not good for him. He must be allowed to take responsibility for his own life, even if it is with calamitous results.'

'I don't agree.'

'Then you think that what your mother did at the time you wanted to marry Usha was justified?'

'Events have proved that it did me no harm. I realize now that she was right.'

'I fail to understand on what basis you make such a statement, but then by the same token, why did you marry me against her wishes?'

'She didn't have all the facts on which to base her judgement, and I was mature enough to make my own decision.'

'Do you mean to say that if she had been on the scene and objected to me, you would not have married me?'

'There's no point in arguing about hypothetical situations.'

Their arguments got them nowhere, because the differences in their attitudes were so fundamental that neither could convince the other of his point of view. Finally, by tacit agreement, they dropped the subject.

Ravi was particularly annoyed because he thought Ann had done what she had in a crusading spirit, and not because she felt anything for Mohini. He also felt that at least part of Ann's motivation was a chance to get back at her mother-in-law.

Ann admitted to herself that her mother-in-law's discomfiture did give her some satisfaction, but it was certainly not that which had impelled her to act on Mohini's behalf.

Ravi thought she was irrational in applying her beliefs to a cultural milieu which was alien to her and which she could not comprehend. He could not push his anger and resentment aside, and the change in him was reflected even in little things. He no longer kissed her on sudden impulse, or came up behind her on tiptoe while she was busy in the kitchen and gave her a quick hug, or sat close to her while listening to music. He also stopped giving her admonitions about taking care not to tire herself, or complaining that she wasn't eating enough. Although she used to be irritated by his fussing, now she missed it. She also missed the physical closeness which had always been an important part of their relationship.

To add to the general atmosphere of discord, Ravi was already fed up with the job. At first he complained that he got stuck in the office. Now he grumbled that they treated him like a bloody agricultural extension worker.

'They want me to do everything—scout around for farmers who are willing to take the trials, make up a schedule for spraying, supply the pesticide. I should be grateful they don't want me to take a pump and actually do the spraying.'

Mahesh said that he would take trials with grapes and vegetable crops, and enlist a few more farmers in that area to help. Shri promised to introduce Ravi to some farmers in Satara district. This would provide another location with a different climate and rainfall pattern. It was decided that they would go to Shri's village one Sunday, and his father would take them round to farmers he thought were suitable.

Ann asked, 'How long do you expect you will be away?'

'Only for the day. Why?'

'Can I come along?'

'It will be very boring for you.'

'No it won't. Please let me come. I would love to see a different place, and it will be interesting to visit Shri's home.'

'I really don't think you would enjoy it. Besides, I am not sure you ought to be driving around in a jeep.'

'It won't be so bad on a highway.'

'First of all, you have never sat in a jeep. Second of all, you don't know what passes under the name of a highway here.'

'It can't do any harm, Ravi. I am five months pregnant now. The danger's mostly in the first and third trimester.'

'We'll ask the doctor.'

The doctor said it would be all right if the ride was not too rough and Ann took care not to get overtired.

'See? What did I tell you?' Ann said.

'How are you going to make sure you don't get overtired? Suppose you do get tired. What are we going to do? Just drop you off by the roadside? Or drive straight back without doing what we are going for?'

'But I won't get tired. I've never felt better. Please darling, let me come.'

'If anything did happen, I'd never forgive myself.'

Ann started laughing, and annoyed, he said, 'What's so funny?'

COME RAIN

'Never mind,' Ann said. 'Let's stop the argument. I have decided to go, and that's that. If anything does happen, you can blame my mulishness. I take full responsibility.'

They started early in the morning.

The day was bright and warm and Ann was happy and excited, and it made Ravi think of the many times they had gone on outings in California. They either took a packed lunch along, or stopped at a roadside place and bought food to carry it to some pretty spot that took their fancy. Ann preferred to do this rather than eat in restaurants. Once however, driving along the shore highway they had come across a little old-fashioned inn. It was really a private home and the old couple to whom it belonged ran it as an eating place. There were no waitresses, no menus, none of the adjuncts of the usual restaurant. Only one kind of meal was offered. It was expensive, but it was good, and they had made the journey specially once again just to eat there. Ravi felt a wave of nostalgia and thought, some day we must go back and do all these things again.

When they picked up Shri at his room, he was surprised to see Ann.

'I didn't know you were coming. Won't it be too strenuous for you?'

Ann laughed, but her laugh had an edge of irritation. 'The way you people go on, someone might think I was a fragile object. I am strong as a horse, and I am not going to be bothered by a simple car ride.' But then her irritation was replaced by a feeling that is probably shared at some time or the other by every woman, of being, in a manner the male of the species cannot be, privy to the mystique of creation; a feeling also, not so much of superiority but of apartness—an awareness of something that cannot, will not, be shared.

Ravi and Ann sat in the front seat next to the driver. Ann drank in everything she could see, the countryside, the hamlets, the people. The day had turned cloudy and the countryside was lush and green, the sides of the road muddy. People walked and bicycled along the road, and the traffic was as mixed as in the city, and almost as unmindful of traffic rules. Animals strayed into the road, bullock carts drove in the middle of the road and gave way only after much honking of horns, or drove on the wrong side of the road and suddenly started crossing to the right side in front of their car. Bicyclists rode three

abreast and gave only enough room for a car to pass them with a few inches to spare. Ann was amused to think that even though such highways were built with motor vehicles in mind, they obviously had to be shared with everything else. This highway certainly had nothing in common with the highways in the United States along which people drove in their own private boxes on wheels at monotonous speeds, cut off for that period from the rest of humanity. Yet, even though it was easier and physically less taxing to drive there, it was no easier on the drivers' nerves. The statistics about the ulcers and the hypertension caused by driving were irrefutable evidence of it. Perhaps there was a lesson here, that it was unnatural for man to shut himself in this contraption and hurtle through long distances.

'What is that range of mountains?' She pointed.

Ravi said, 'It's all part of the Western Ghats which we crossed when we came up from Bombay.'

'I must learn the geography of this region.'

Shri said, 'There are a lot of hill forts in this range of mountains.'

He pointed out some as they drove along.

Ann said, 'Have you climbed any of them?'

'Yes, several. There's one right next to my village and we used to climb it often when we were children. Most of the forts have nothing on top except a few ruins and crumbling battlements. But if you have a little knowledge and a lot of imagination, you can conjure up history.'

'It would be fun to climb a fort.'

'There's Songad near Sangampur.'

'Ravi, we must go there some day.'

'Sure. If you are going to become a proper Maharashtrian, you should become familiar with the Shivaji legend.'

'Who was he?'

'He was a Maratha chieftain who fought against enormous odds to prevent the Moguls from getting a foothold in Maharashtra. He is the great hero that every Marathi child is brought up on.'

Suddenly, it seemed, everything changed. The countryside was no longer green, but dry and brown. The fields were ploughed up, waiting for rain.

'What happened here?' Ann said.

Shri said, 'This is what we call the rabi rain area. We get rain here after the southwest monsoon is over. But usually we do have some summer showers which haven't come this year. Things are pretty bad in some villages which haven't any drinking water.'

'Heavens! What do they do?'

'The zilla parishad sends water by tankers. Actually, all this is drought area. It only rains enough once in five or six years. The rest of the time there's water shortage. The government has to spend crores of rupees supplying water to hundreds of villages by tankers, yet nobody has tried to find any permanent solution for the problem.'

'Such as what?' Ravi asked.

'Oh, digging wells, laying pipes from the nearest canal or river, building reservoirs, digging village tanks. They are doing some of it, but it's not nearly enough.'

'It's never going to be enough, so long as we don't control our population.'

Ann said, 'So if it doesn't rain, they won't be able to plant crops.'

'No.'

'Then what happens to your trials, Ravi?'

'We are only going to have trials with irrigated crops. Nobody uses pesticides on rainfed crops anyway.'

In a little over two hours they reached the turnoff to Shri's village, and then had to drive about four miles over a very rough dirt road to get there.

Ann said, 'Shri, is this the road you agitated for?'

'Yes. That's the old road there. It's visible now because the water is very low, but you can see that the high water mark is above the road.'

'Wow, I feel I am travelling along a road that made history.'

Ravi said, 'You are an incurable romantic, Ann.'

'But this is the stuff of romance, Ravi. The indomitable courage of simple illiterate people, their readiness to fight against injustice at the cost of personal safety.'

Ravi thought that she was making a big thing out of what was probably a trivial episode, but he desisted from making any comment.

Shri's house was in a wadi which, he explained, is like a suburb of a village. It had three rooms built in brick and mud, and a tiled roof. There were two rooms side by side and one in

~~the back.~~ In the front a covered veranda was created by the sloping roof which was supported at the edge by crude poles. The floor of the veranda as well as the house was plastered with cowdung. A cow and a calf and two goats were tied outside in the yard which was fenced by closely planted shevri trees. Compared to some of the very crude, primitive huts in the hamlet as well as the ones she had noticed on the way, Shri's house was not too poor in appearance. Shri's father came out to receive them and Ann was surprised to see that he looked much older than she had expected, a small wizened man with a deeply lined face burned black by the sun. He wore a coarse unbleached dhoti and shirt.

Shri's mother served them tea. She was younger and more vigorous-looking, although her face too had deep lines. Shri's father suggested names of farmers they should visit, and Shri planned the order in which they would visit them so as to minimize retracing their steps.

When they started out Shri's mother said that they must come back for lunch. Ann said she had brought food but Shri's mother wouldn't take a no. Then Shri said it would not be convenient to come back as they were travelling away from Pawarwadi.

She said, 'You have a car. What's a few miles in a car? You can come back, eat, rest awhile and then go.'

Shri seemed embarrassed. Finally Ann said, 'Let's come back to eat. It won't hurt us to backtrack a few miles. She is right.'

The old woman beamed and said, 'That's good. Otherwise when will such important people come and eat in our house again?'

Ravi asked Ann if she wouldn't, since they were coming back, like to wait in Shri's house, but she said she would much prefer to accompany them.

It took them quite a while to meet the farmers and talk to them.

As in Pawarwadi, everywhere their car stopped, they were immediately surrounded by crowds of people, dozens of children who gaped at them, but mainly at Ann. Shri got mad and tried to scatter them by shouting at them, and Ann told him to let them be, but she was beginning to get a little fed up with it. After a while she stopped making the effort to be friendly and try to talk to them, and simply sat in the shade and let them stare at her while Ravi talked to the farmers.

COME RAIN

They were dusty and hot when they returned to Shri's house. They washed their hands and feet and splashed their faces with cool well water and sat down to eat. There was bhakri and a green vegetable, chicken curry and kheer made out of cracked wheat. The curry was fiery hot and the pieces of chicken, which were few and far between, were quite leathery.

Shri told Ann, 'Don't eat the curry if it's too hot for you. I had warned my mother not to make anything hot, but of course she cannot believe anyone can eat absolutely bland food.'

Ann was trying to wipe her eyes and nose surreptitiously. She would have liked to polish her plate but she had to leave the curry and vegetable untouched.

They left immediately after lunch as they still had one more visit to make on the way back. Ann folded her hands and said to Shri's mother, 'Thank you very much. That was a delicious lunch.' Shri's mother was charmed that this foreigner wore a sari and spoke Marathi.

She put some kunkoo on Ann's forehead and then they all got into the jeep. Shri said, 'I am sorry about the hot food.'

'It's all right, Shri.'

'I saw your eyes watering when you tried to eat the curry.'

'But then I left it. And there were enough other things I could eat, so I had an adequate lunch'.

'I should have put my foot down and not subjected you to a meal in our house.'

Ravi said a little sharply, 'Forget it, Shri. It doesn't matter.'

'Really, Shri, don't make such a fuss about it. Your mother would have been hurt if we had refused, and I am glad we didn't. She was so sweet. And she must have gone to so much trouble to cook the meal. I am only sorry that I couldn't do it justice. Do you always eat such hot food?'

'Yes. The people who can't afford spices use a lot of chillies to make food tasty.'

Ravi gave Ann a look.

About forty kilometres from Pawarwadi they turned into a drive-way flanked by gulmohors which were covered with bright orange-red flowers. They stopped in front of a stone house.

Shri had said, 'Pathak is very well respected around here. He is an excellent farmer, and is always trying new crops and new techniques. He has done a lot for the village, built them an

ing on lift, helped them with their school building. Yet he always keeps himself aloof. He doesn't behave as though he was one of them, and some people resent it.'

Nothing had prepared Ravi and Ann for the tall graceful man in faded denims, striped T-shirt and a widebrimmed hat. His eyes, which had spidery lines at the outer corners from scrunching up against the sun, looked a startling blue-gray against his deeply-tanned face.

When Ravi explained the purpose of his visit he said, 'I would be happy to help. Why don't you come in?'

He ushered them into the house, a stone and brick structure with a flat roof and plastered whitewashed walls. They sat in a spacious but very sparsely-furnished living room, and a manservant brought in a tray laden with tea and eatables. A middle-aged woman appeared and started pouring tea.

Ann said, 'You needn't have bothered. We have just had lunch.'

Pathak said, 'My mother is so happy to have visitors that she insists on pressing food on them.'

After they had disposed of the business, Ravi asked him, 'Did you go to college in the U.S.?'

'Is it that obvious?'

Ravi smiled and nodded. 'Where?'

'Texas A and M.'

'How did you happen to decide to come to this out-of-the-way place?'

'It's an ancestral farm.'

'Has your family always cultivated it?'

'No, my grandfather left this place and moved to Sangampur. The land was cultivated by tenants. Then when the tenancy bill was passed, my father thought that it would be a good idea to take over the farm and cultivate it ourselves rather than let the tenants get it. He appointed a manager and came every Sunday to supervise things. I used to accompany him on occasional Sundays, and I suppose it was always at the back of my mind that some day I would go back to farming the land. So when I found out that I would never be happy in a job, and preferred to be my own master, this is where I came.'

*Ann said, 'You have a lovely place.'

'Thank you.'

'Doesn't it get a bit lonely for you here?'

'Not particularly. Usually I am too busy to think about being bored or lonely. When I have time I read, listen to music. Besides, Sangampur is not too far away for occasional visits. We have relatives there whom my mother likes to visit, and I get to see friends and take in a play.'

Ravi cut in suddenly and said, 'We had better get going. It's getting late and we have had a long day.'

Pathak's smug, bland manner irritated him. And he felt annoyed that Ann was apparently falling for his surface charm. She had not got along so well with anyone else she had met, but with him she had been chatting comfortably as though they were old friends.

On the way back Ann said, 'He is a remarkable man, isn't he?'

'Pathak? What's so remarkable about him?'

'That he chooses to live in this village and do farming.'

'A lot of educated men are finding that farming pays or that the competition in the cities is too tough for them and are going back to their land.'

'He seems so self-sufficient and content to be what he is.'

'Do you measure a man's worth by his contentment?'

'I was not measuring his worth, Ravi.'

'But you implied that it's a good thing to be content with what you are doing.'

'It is nice to be happy with what you are doing.'

'Great things are not achieved by people who are satisfied with the way things are.'

'Now you are talking about something else altogether.'

'We are talking about the same thing, and you know it.'

Ann kept quiet during the rest of the drive home. But that was not Ravi's last word on the subject. Later when they were in bed he said, 'I know what you were trying to do. You were holding him up as an ideal for me. I can't understand what impressed you about him. What does it take to do what he is doing? Not any special knowledge or ability or intelligence. Almost anybody could do it, given the capital. Besides, people like him put themselves in a situation where, no matter what they do, they are bound to stand out and seem successful.'

Ann was quite taken aback that he returned to the subject at all, and bewildered by his acrimony. Was he jealous because she had given unthinking praise to a stranger? Obviously, he

construed it as criticism of himself, and nothing could have been farther from her mind.

She said, 'Darling, I agree with everything you say. Anyway, I hadn't meant to draw any sort of comparison between you and him. It was just a casual remark which meant nothing. So forget about it, will you?'

She was still thinking after he fell asleep, and she suddenly remembered the spat they had had over his admiring a starlet. She had thought that he was deliberately trying to provoke her, and obviously he had thought the same of her. She smiled and snuggled up to him. He stirred slightly but his sleep remained undisturbed. It had started raining in earnest, and a cool caress of a breeze was blowing in the window. Her last thought as she fell asleep was, I hope it's raining on Shri's village.

She was amused to be reminded again of Pathak the next afternoon when Shri came to see her, saying in apology for his visit, 'I came to see if you had recovered from the trip. You looked quite tired yesterday.'

'Why, Shri, how sweet of you to worry about me. I was a bit tired but I feel fine today. Aren't you coming in?'

'I don't want to disturb you if you are busy.'

She thought with a flicker of exasperation that their relationship had certainly passed that stage of coyness.

'I am not busy and I would love to have company.'

She took him into the kitchen so she could go on preparing for dinner while they talked. She made tea by boiling the leaves in the water and said, 'Would you believe that I like this tea now? At first I used to be amazed that people could actually drink this horrible brew.'

Sipping the tea he said, 'I think the way you have adapted to our country is admirable.'

'There's nothing very admirable about it.'

'It is admirable to adapt so easily when you come from an affluent society to a poor one.'

Before she could make any response he suddenly asked, 'What did you think of our house?'

His voice was defiant, as though he dared her to deny the reality of his house being a poor rudimentary structure.

• She said, 'It's a nice house.'

'Yes, very nice. Only you wouldn't like to live in it.'

'What point are you trying to make, Shri? Given the choice

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between your house and ours, say, wouldn't you choose to live in ours?'

'I might, if I had the money to do it with. Since I don't, I really haven't a choice, do I?'

'I don't really have a choice either. Everyone's social and financial position limits his choices. And since I am not responsible for your poverty why are you being so aggressive with me?'

'I am sorry. Being poor, I have no right to be aggressive. I should be suitably meek.'

Without saying anything she got up and fetched some potatoes and began to pare and slice them into a bowl.

'You are angry with me.'

'Yes. You have succeeded in making me angry, if that's what you came for.'

'I am sorry, I really am. I don't know what got into me. No, that's not correct. I do know. When you were in our house you were uneasy. You didn't quite know what to say to my parents, how to relate to them. Then we went to Pathak's house. And without ever having met him, you had no problem finding something to talk to him about. And I—' He swallowed and she saw his Adam's apple go up and down. 'I felt sort of angry that purely due to accidental circumstances, we belong to different worlds. He belongs to your world, I never can.'

Ann said quietly, 'Shri, you are saying that people who have money automatically belong to the same world. That's not true at all.'

Shri said again, 'I am sorry. I had no right to feel the way I did.'

'That's not what I meant at all.'

He changed the subject suddenly. 'You are so skilful with that knife. Women here don't use a knife for cutting vegetables.'

'The contraptions they use here are deadly. I am sure I wouldn't be able to use one of them. Look, I am not so skilful after all. I have nicked myself.'

'Let me see.'

She held her hand out.

'It's bleeding,' he said. Unexpectedly, he held her hand in his and put pressure on the cut.

She laughed. 'It's only a slight cut.'

She made as if to withdraw her hand and he instantly

release it, getting out of his chair at the same time with the fluid grace which small compact men often have.

'I had better go,' he said.

'Wait till Ravi comes back. He'll be sorry to have missed you.'

'I'll come again some other time. You had better put something on that cut. It's bleeding again.'

She smiled, 'You know, when I was a little girl, I never played rough, and I envied my friends their cuts and bruises. Marks of bravery. Once I got the fruit-paring knife and gritted my teeth and cut my leg with it. I achieved quite a respectable gash, and had to have my leg bandaged. I was very proud to display the bandage at school the next day, but I did not enjoy the tetanus shot I had to take. My mother didn't ask any questions, but I thought she suspected that I had not come by that cut legitimately.'

He said seriously, 'It's difficult to believe that you ever had any need for such pretences.'

'Everybody needs pretences, Shri. I only hope I never pass the limit beyond which I have to begin to lie to myself.'

16

There had been almost continuous rain for two days and Ann thought that everything in this country was exaggerated—the heat, the sun, the rain.

'If you call this rain exaggerated,' Ravi said, 'you should be in Mahabaleshwar—it's a hill station near here. There it rains two hundred inches in about three months. And then there's Chera-punjee of course. I have wanted to go there ever since I learned about it in geography class. It rains four hundred and fifty inches there during the monsoon.'

'Wow! Where is it?'

'In Assam.'

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The sunless sky and the constant drizzle and the ~~slushy~~ streets made Ann think of a cheerful fire and hot punch and the talk and laughter of people.

She said, 'Let's give a party.'

'What are we celebrating?' Ravi asked.

'I don't know. How about Fluff's three-months' birthday?' She picked up the cat which had now become quite plump and fluffy, although several mangy patches were still visible if one looked closely.

'You are mad.'

'Why am I mad? You have your work. I get lonely and bored staying home all day all by myself, and I think having company would cheer me up.'

'Doing work which you don't enjoy can be more dreary than being bored and lonely.'

Ann was quite taken aback at the vehemence with which he said it.

'Darling, I didn't know you disliked the job so much.'

'I do.'

'Why don't you leave it then?'

'I've done some exploring, but there isn't anything in the field in which I want to work. That being the case, what would be the point of getting out of this job and stepping into another just like it? If I stick to this one, I will at least get the benefit of seniority.'

'What exactly don't you like about it? Your bosses?'

'No, actually my immediate boss is quite a pleasant man, but his vision is limited. Understandably so, because the Indians who work in foreign companies know that their outfit is only a subsidiary to the parent company. They cannot make any important policy decisions, and their R and D is a very meagre affair. The real research goes on abroad and there simply isn't any scope for it here.'

'But what you are doing is also important work.'

'Important to them, not to me. What can I get out of laying out trials to test already tried and tested pesticides under Indian conditions? I am just helping them collect data that will be useful in determining their marketing strategy.'

Ann said nothing further about the party. She felt depressed that Ravi still disliked his job. Because he had not lately complained about it, she had thought that he had now reconciled

himself to working in some such job. Now she saw that he was far from reconciled. She felt some sympathy for him, but could not understand how he could go on working at a job he thought was dreary or at least completely unsuitable, without arriving at some sort of mental compromise. It was unnatural to be so unhappy in a job without either quitting it or coming to terms with it.

As for his inability to work at doing exactly what he felt he was trained for, she felt that he was being oversensitive. The world was full of people who were forced to do something different from what they had trained for or planned or wanted to do.

Several days later Ravi asked suddenly, 'Ann, how would you like to go to the United States?'

'For a visit?'

'To stay.' Seeing the dismay on her face he hastily added, 'For several years.'

'Why would I want to do that?'

'In case I got my job back. It would be a chance to do something I want to do.'

'Are you serious?'

'It depends on you.'

She said slowly, 'I don't know, Ravi. You have sprung this on me so suddenly, I would have to think about it. I have learned to like it here, and there are many reasons why I felt and would now more than ever feel out of pace with life there.'

'Well, it was just an idea. I wanted to find out your reaction.'

As suddenly as he had introduced the subject, he dropped it. A few days later she chanced upon a letter from a former colleague of his, Chuck Fitzroy. She was looking for a stapler and opened a drawer and saw the letter. It had a recent postmark and had been written to his office address. This was a sufficiently unusual circumstance to allow her to overcome her usual scruples about reading someone else's mail without his permission.

'As for getting your old job back,' Chuck had written, 'that's a little more difficult. Your job per se is no longer open, of course, and even taking you back in some other capacity would

present problems. According to your own admission you have
'Wow! Will you touch with what's going on in the field. I don't want
'In Assam' discouraging, because a possibility of the sort you

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imply does exist. I would suggest, however, that rather than my paving the way or your corresponding with the boss from there, it would improve your chances considerably if you came here on an exploratory visit. As you know very well, face-to-face contact can achieve more than volumes of letters.'

So, Ann thought, when Ravi had talked about going back to the U.S., it was not just idle talk meant to explore her reaction. He had already written to Chuck. And given him the office address. Why the secrecy? Because he didn't want her to know, obviously. But eventually, if he took some such decision, he would have to discuss it with her. Or had he meant to present her with a *fait accompli*?

She handed him the letter without any comment.

He said, 'Where did you get it?'

'In your drawer. No, I wasn't snooping. I was looking for something, and saw the letter. The only reason I picked it up was that it had your office address on it.'

'Nothing unusual about that. I am not here during the day, so I get mail quicker if I get it at the office.'

'Yes, but you brought this letter home, and still didn't show it to me.'

'You've read it anyway.'

'But there's a difference between your showing it to me and my coming across it accidentally.'

Ravi didn't say anything.

'Ravi, don't you think you should have shown it to me? Don't you think I am entitled to know that you are contemplating something like this?'

'I am not contemplating anything,' he said in exasperation. 'I am just exploring possibilities.'

'Without taking me into your confidence.'

'I don't think a wife has to be told everything her husband is doing or thinking.'

'Even if it concerns her?'

'I don't see how it concerns you if I write a letter to an old friend and colleague.'

'Ravi, let's not quibble. Any plans you make for the future concern me.'

'But I haven't made any plans. I happened to be writing to Chuck and it was just an idea I threw out. You talk as though I already had my bags packed and my flight booked.'

'You could at least discuss such ideas with me.'

'Do you mean every time I write a letter I should submit a copy to you?'

'No, that's not what I mean at all.'

'Then what do you mean?'

'Let's drop it.'

Ravi was being evasive and it troubled Ann. He had adroitly put her in the wrong, but the fact remained that he had written to Chuck specifically to explore the possibility of getting his old job back—as far as she knew they had not been in regular correspondence—and had tried to hide it from her. It hurt her to think that he did not confide in her. She was not an overromantic woman who felt that there should be no secrets between a husband and wife, no areas where there was less than total communication. But she could not understand why he would be secretive about something like this. The logical reason was of course that he did not think she would be receptive to his plans. In fact she was quite shaken to think that he was perhaps considering going back to America.

She failed to understand why he was toying with the idea, why he had given up so quickly trying to make it work here. Or had he always had it in the back of his mind? Does everyone who goes abroad have it? But he had been different—or so she had thought. Was it possible that he had said what he did because that was what she wanted to hear, projected an image that she wanted to see?

They had gone driving in the Berkeley hills and he had remarked, 'You are very good at the wheel. You American girls are so competent it's frightening.'

'Do you find competence in general frightening, or competence in women?'

He had laughed. 'Are you a women's liberationist?'

'Of course. Aren't you?'

'In theory, yes. In practice probably not.'

'At least you are honest.'

The woods were fragrant with the scent of eucalyptus and Ravi had said, 'I used to think that people wouldn't have colds here, then when I found that they do, I was quite disillusioned.'

'Why shouldn't they have colds?'

'All this eucalyptus in the air. It reminds me of the times I had a cold. My mother used to sprinkle a few drops of eucalyptus oil on a handkerchief which she put in my shirt pocket.'

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Somehow she had felt quite charmed by this small tidbit from his Indian childhood. He had seemed, on the surface, so much like any American man, that she had been a little disappointed, and then had told herself not to be silly. She probably wouldn't have been so much at ease with someone who wore exotic clothes and read Omar Khayyam to her.

She had said, 'What are you studying?'

'I'm not studying any longer, I'm working. But I studied agricultural biochemistry and plant physiology.'

'What sort of a job do you have?'

'I'm a research scientist with Calloway Chemicals. I'm working on plant hormones.'

'Do plants have hormones?'

'Of course. Several have been identified so far, and now they are synthetically manufactured.'

'What do these hormones do?'

'They accelerate or slow down plant growth, or increase the size of a plant or a fruit. Some of them are used as weedicides. There are endless possibilities and practical applications.'

'I am afraid I don't know the first thing about agriculture, but it all sounds fascinating. And what exactly are you working on?'

'My colleagues and I feel we have isolated a new substance which has fantastic possibilities.'

'Very impressive. Will you continue this work when you go back to India?'

'I hope so.'

'You have not considered staying here like so many of your countrymen do?'

'Not seriously.'

'It's nice to hear you say that. I imagine your country badly needs trained scientists like you. Why do so many Indians opt for staying here? Because there are better job opportunities here, higher pay?'

'That's only part of it, not the whole explanation. Take the average student who comes here. He has no definite idea about his future when he comes. He is young and impressionable. After spending a few years here, an idea of what he wants to do slowly emerges, and it is in the context of life here. Often many of us get jobs to earn back some of the money spent on education or to amass a small fortune to take home. The job makes it

even clearer to them what life would be like for them here. India recedes in the distance, it is an unknown quantity, full of uncertainties and hardships. And it seems easiest just to accept what they already have.

'But not for you.'

'Not for me.'

He smiled a little deprecatingly.

She remembered another occasion when they were again driving. They drove up and around a winding hill road and came to a plateau which overlooked a little canyon. The river was bunded and the blue lake spread its fingers through the irregular gullies of the canyon. It was a lonely spot. They stood there side by side looking down, filled with the beauty of the quiet scene, then Ravi said, 'Perhaps some day you will come to India and I will show you the beauty of my country.'

She had said, 'No perhaps about it. I have wanted to go to India for a long time. Now after having got to know you, I have made up my mind that someday, somehow, I am going there.'

But since coming to India Ravi had not taken her anywhere. Rather than showing off his country, he seemed to be apologizing for it. Had he simply been sucked under by things and become so disheartened that he could not summon up enthusiasm even for whatever was good and beautiful and interesting in India? Or had she perhaps misread him? When he said all those things which had led her to believe that he had always intended to come back, was he just giving lip service to the accepted and acceptable view that trained young scientists like him owed a debt to their country? Did he even then want to escape from this inevitable decision? Wasn't the fact that he had taken a job instead of going home immediately after finishing his studies an indication of procrastination? He had said once that if he didn't go back to India, he wouldn't be able to live comfortably with his conscience. Did he then feel that marrying her would give him a strong enough excuse to square with his conscience the decision to stay in the United States? Had she unwittingly pushed him into coming back?

Ann felt more disturbed than she wanted to admit even to herself. As for whether she would go back to America with him, she preferred not to think about it for the time being. Logically, since she had come to India with him, she should be happy to go back with him, especially as there was nothing to keep her

here. But that was not strictly true. For some reason she found herself reluctant to agree to go back. Not the least of the reasons was that it would seem like a defeat. People would nod their heads understandingly and imply that it was all right for hippies and the disciples of Rajneesh to want to live in India, but the country could have nothing to offer to sensible people.

Ann smiled at herself. How could she make a major decision dependent on what people would say? It should be governed by what she felt.

A number of days passed and Ravi did not refer again to the subject, thus sparing her the necessity of thinking it out or taking a decision about it.

17

Mohini said, 'If Prem and I had a place of our own, I would ask you to come and stay with us. You shouldn't be alone all day.'

Ann laughed.

'I didn't know I had said something funny,' Mohini said.

'Don't be offended please, Mohini. I laughed because Ravi said exactly the same thing. He suggested that we go to stay with Aai. I said God forbid.'

Now it was Mohini's turn to laugh.

Ann said, 'But seriously, Mohini, it's perfectly all right for me to be alone. Millions of American women go through their pregnancies alone. And Mrs Patil has a phone which she says I can use any time to call the doctor, or Ravi. Of course now I have grown so large and clumsy and don't go out much, I appreciate company, but I wouldn't go to live in someone else's house for it. I am most comfortable in my own home.'

Ann was preparing for the baby, making pads and covers and wraps.

'You don't do all this by hand, do you?'

'No,' Ann said. 'Mrs Patil also has a sewing machine which I may use. People are so helpful. And I love making all these things. It's so much nicer to make your own than to buy ready-made mass-produced stuff.'

'You know, Ann, it's considered bad luck to stitch baby clothes before the baby is born.'

'Do you believe it?'

'N-no.'

'You do, a little. It's all right for Indian women to believe it. There are plenty of women in the family to do all this after your delivery. Or perhaps the belief originated in the days of high infant mortality. Making preparations for a baby seemed to tempt fate. Anyway, I'll pass on all my baby things to you, so you won't have to make your own before your baby is born.'

'Which won't be for quite a while, I hope.'

'Why not?'

'I don't want to have a baby while I am living with my in-laws.'

'Why? I thought they were quite nice people.'

'Oh they are really. But—I don't know. First of all they are a large family. There's a lot of coming and going of aunts, uncles, cousins. I feel quite suffocated among so many people. And they are so different, and everyone is full of advice for me—for us. It all becomes difficult to take. I suppose they only try to be nice, in their own way, they don't even realize that they are being overbearing. They treat me like a child who is made much of and showered with praise and gifts so long as I am obedient. But I can see that eventually when life settles down to being normal, there may be a lot of friction.'

'What does Prem say about it?'

'Nothing. He doesn't even see the potential conflict in the situation. They are his people. This is what he has grown up with. If I complain to him about something, he looks very surprised. It doesn't occur to him that something that he has taken for granted all his life can bother someone else. And if I say, for instance, that I dislike being trotted out to be shown off to every visitor and then expected to sit there while they all talk about things I can't possibly be interested in, in a language I can't understand very well, he says, why don't you tell my mother that you don't like it? But he can't see that she won't take that

sort of rebellion from me. I don't mean that she will force me to do something against my expressed wishes, but there will be a lot of muttering if I refuse to oblige her in such a simple matter. Why are you smiling?

'I am seeing parallels.'

Mohini suddenly looked down. 'Yes, I realize that. The way Aai treated you, of course.'

'I am not referring to her particularly. What about the rest of you? If you had been more friendly with me, it would have made such a lot of difference. Ravi said it was because none of you knew English well enough. But you have proved that you can manage to communicate very well in English.'

Mohini still wouldn't meet Ann's eye. She said, 'I can only say I am sorry.'

'I didn't mean to make you feel guilty, Mohini. I would just like to find out why you behaved as you did.'

'Line of least resistance, maybe. And you were an outsider. We didn't quite know what to make of you, how to talk to you. And you do know a lot of Marathi now, you must admit.'

These were all merely excuses, but Ann didn't press the point.

'Mohini, can I ask you something?'

'Of course.'

'You remember the day I came? When Ravi introduced me to Aai, she looked me over and said something to him. What was it?'

Mohini didn't pretend that she didn't know what Ann was talking about, or that she didn't remember. She said, in a low voice, 'Aai said that since Ravi chose you when he could have had his pick of Indian girls, she had thought that you would at least be beautiful.'

Ann laughed. 'And after one look at me, she couldn't understand why the hell Ravi had married me.'

Mohini didn't smile. 'It was a mean thing to say.'

Ann wanted to say that she didn't hear Mohini protest about it, but she let it go. It was ironical that her position in the Gogte family had been made worse because of the role she had played in Mohini's marriage. Ravi now seemed to have forgiven her, but he was unbending towards Mohini. Ann had asked him if she could invite Mohini and Prem for dinner one day and he had said, 'I'd prefer it if you didn't.'

'Why not? She is your sister. Have you changed towards her just because she has married outside the caste?'

'Caste has nothing to do with it. I don't like the guy.'

'You met him only once, and that not under the best of circumstances.'

'It was enough.'

'If you could only see how happy Mohini is—'

'That's beside the point.'

'How can it be beside the point? Isn't that the reason why you opposed the marriage? Because you didn't think she could be happy married to him?'

'You can't judge in just a few months whether a marriage is happy or not. Besides, even if she is happy, I still don't like him, and I don't see any reason why I should be forced to socialize with him. You can call Mohini if you want, but not Prem.'

'Mohini comes to see me anyway. I don't have to invite her for a formal dinner.'

One day she asked Mohini, 'Why don't you stay till Ravi comes home?'

Mohini said, simply, 'I'll stay and talk to him the day he accepts Prem.'

'You are a family of the most stubborn people I have met. I can't believe that your mother, who is presumably fond of you, won't try to make up with you. Her pride is more important than her relationship with her children. I guess at this moment Mahesh is her favourite son and Uma her favourite daughter-in-law.'

Mohini merely smiled. She also, like Ravi, desisted from expressing any overt criticism of her mother.

Ann persisted, 'Do you think she will ever make up with you?'

'I don't know Ann. I try not to think about it. I suppose eventually she will.'

'Do you miss being able to go home?'

'Of course.'

'Why don't you just go one day?'

Mohini shook her head.

'Why not? What can happen?'

'I don't really know.'

'Would you go if Aai invited you?'

'Yes.' She hastily added, 'But don't you go and intercede on my behalf. It will only land you in hot water.'

Amused, Ann said, 'Don't worry, I won't.'

She wondered whether Mohini saw all the petty power politics of family life for what it was, or whether she just accepted it as part of life. She didn't feel that she knew Mohini too well yet, although she welcomed the change in her, from a shy girl to a woman, in just such a short period. Even her face had changed, become more open, more receptive—a woman's face. She had met Prem a few more times and been favourably impressed by him. Perhaps he was not the sort of person she would have sought to know better if she had met him somewhere casually. But since he was Mohini's husband, she just could not understand why Ravi refused to make the effort to get to know him.

She once said to Ravi, 'I thought Indian families were close, yet you are quite willing to excommunicate someone who marries against your wishes.'

'Nobody is excommunicating Mohini.'

'In effect you are. If you won't accept her husband, you can't expect her to have anything to do with you. And you can't explain it by your personal dislike of Prem. There's no guarantee that you would have liked a man your parents picked out for Mohini.'

'Then I wouldn't have had much to do with him.'

'Much. You didn't say "anything".'

'What's that supposed to signify?'

'Nothing. I am just trying to understand you. For instance, would you be happy if Mohini's marriage didn't work, just so you could be proved right?'

'Since you seem to know everything about my mental processes, Ann, you can figure it out.'

As Ann's delivery date approached, Ravi began to worry. 'What if you call and I am not in the office and it takes too long to contact me?'

'I'll call for a taxi and go to the hospital. There's usually plenty of time between the first pain and the delivery.'

'Are you sure you won't consider going to stay at Aai's?'

'Absolutely.'

'I'd feel much better knowing someone was with you while I was away.'

'Honestly, Ravi, we've been over all this.'

Ann finally felt the first pain during the night, two weeks before the due date. She lay quietly until she felt another. She felt that an irreversible process had been set in motion, and she was now like someone on a slide, gathering momentum for the inevitable fall. She felt a sudden clutch of fear and told herself not to be silly. She was only sharing the experience of millions of women before her and millions who would come after her. There was an exaltation in the thought.

Ravi came awake instantly when she called him and said, 'But it can't be, honey, it's still early. Are you sure?'

'I am sure.' Ann felt positive this was not a false alarm.

Ravi looked at the bedside clock and said, 'I'll go to the Patils and call Mahesh.'

'Do you think you should bother him?'

'At this time of the night it won't be easy to get a taxi. And I have already talked to him and told him that we might have to call on him if you have to be taken to the hospital during the night.'

When Ravi left, Ann packed a bag, thinking that almost everyone she knew back home would be horrified that she didn't have a phone. That was one of the things living in India had taught her, how many things you could do without which you had thought were absolutely necessary adjuncts of life, and how much simpler life was without endless possessions and gadgets. It was a pleasant discovery that, for instance, aerosol sprays of everything from whipped cream to room deodorizer, don't do anything to enrich life, and doing without them doesn't even seem like a deprivation.

Ravi came back and said, 'Mahesh will be here in ten to fifteen minutes. Are the pains bad?'

'No, not yet.'

'My God, I wish there was something I could do.'

'What do you want to do? Don't look so worried. Are you going to be the classic husband and pace the hospital waiting room?'

'Probably. It's so frustrating, you know, not to be able to share the most important moment in our married life. Suddenly you seem far away and I am left outside looking in.'

'Well, do you want to come in? I am sure the doctor will let you if you ask her.'

'I didn't mean it literally.'

COME RAIN

'I know, but watching the delivery might give you more of a feeling of sharing.'

'I don't know,' he said doubtfully. 'I may not be able to take it.'

'You can't have it both ways,' she said laughing. The next moment she was seized with a severe pain and he held her tight until it had passed. Then they heard the car stop outside and he said, 'Thank god.' He felt quite shaken.

Their son was born at five in the morning, an hour and a half after Ann reached the hospital. He weighed four and a half kilos. When the doctor told her that she said, 'That sounds like such a small baby.'

'Small? He's nearly ten pounds.'

'I know. But in kilos it sounds little.'

'He's bigger than most babies I deliver.'

Ann was taken to a room and the baby swaddled and put in a swinging crib. She dozed off, then Ravi was there.

'How are you darling?'

'Fine. Just sweaty and dirty.'

'Was it very bad?'

'Not too bad. Actually, I am quite thrilled that I had my delivery without any injection or saddle-block or anything.'

He looked at the baby. 'Doesn't have much hair, does he?'

'No, he only has a bit of fuzz. It's very soft. You can touch it if you want.'

But Ravi didn't seem interested in touching or picking up the baby. Ann moved back on the bed so that there would be room for him to sit next to her, but he showed no inclination to come closer. She held her hand out to him and finally he took a step towards the bed. He pressed her hand lightly, bent down to plant a kiss on her cheek, then straightening up, said, 'You should rest now. I'll come later.' Before she could say anything, he was gone.

Ann felt tears start in her eyes. She felt hurt and bewildered. Why had he behaved so strangely? He had been so loving and concerned before the delivery. Was he turned off by the process of giving birth, the bloody mess? Did he think of her as dirty because of it? Hindus treated menstruating women and women who had just had a delivery as polluted. Was there something of this feeling deep in his consciousness? Or was it his personal fastidiousness that made him feel that she was unclean?

In the afternoon Ravi came back with his mother, Uma and Mahesh.

She said, 'Haven't you gone to work?'

'Of course not. I am on paternity leave.'

Mahesh laughed.

Ravi said, 'Don't laugh. In America some places they give paternity leave to male employees so they can help look after the household work and the baby because hired help is not available. And even if it is, most people can't afford it.'

His mother said, 'Well, they can do anything they please in America. Here we still have relatives to help. When Ann comes out of the hospital she will come to our house and I will help look after the baby.'

Ann was too taken aback to respond to this. She tried to catch Ravi's eye but he was not looking at her, whether purposely or not she couldn't be sure.

The baby of course was the centre of attention. Her mother-in-law picked him up and was examining him with rapt attention.

She said, with some satisfaction, 'He is quite fair-skinned, isn't he? I think he looks like Ravi, don't you think so, Mahesh?'

'How can you tell what he looks like, so soon?'

'What are we going to call him, Ann?' Ravi asked.

'I thought we would call him William Rahul. William after my father and Rahul for calling.'

'Why do you want two names?' he asked. 'You can call him just William if you want.'

'No, I think he should have an Indian name. William Gogte would sound too outlandish.'

'So what? I know a Marathi man who has called his son Albert after Einstein.'

'Little things matter to children. I don't want him to be conspicuous.'

'You want him to be ordinary and commonplace?'

'No. In important things he can be different, conspicuous, according to his own convictions. But trying to be different in little things only shows eccentricity.'

'You are illogical.'

His mother intervened by saying, 'I think Ann is quite right. Other children are bound to make fun of him if he has a name like William. Why expose him to that unnecessarily?'

'All right, have it your way,' Ravi said. He sounded disappointed. Ann realized with surprise that he would really have liked to call his son William, not because he had any particular affection or regard for her father, but obviously only because the name would advertise the fact that his mother was a foreigner. For the same reason he wanted her to retain her former mode of dress instead of switching to a sari. The things which she wanted to play down in order to be more easily accepted by people, he wanted to stress. It was almost as though he derived status from her being a foreigner, an American.

Her mother-in-law came twice a day, bringing home-cooked meals and gifts—a pretty shawl, dry fruit, homemade sweets. Apparently, as Ann wryly remarked to Mohini, all was forgiven now that she had brought forth a son.

'She is so pleasant and considerate, I can't believe she is the same woman.'

Mohini had unwittingly walked in while Aai was in the room. Aai saw her first, and hurriedly put down the baby and said, 'I was about to go, anyway.' She went out before Ann could protest, and Mohini, who was about to flee, came in.

Ann said, 'You are two of a kind. Why didn't you talk to her? I can quite imagine you having a daughter and then excommunicating her for marrying against your wishes.'

Mohini started laughing.

Ann said, 'I just can't understand you people.'

'Give yourself time.' Mohini was more amused than hurt.

'Sometimes I feel, Mohini, that even a lifetime won't be enough.'

Ann was to leave the hospital on the fifth day. The evening before she was dismayed to discover that she would be going to Ravi's parents' house.

'Why can't we go home?'

'Aai says you agreed to go to their house for a few days.'

'I did nothing of the sort.'

'Well, when she suggested it, you didn't refuse, so she took it that you were going there. Now she's made all sorts of arrangements for you and the baby.'

'Oh all right, I guess just a few days won't do any harm. Have you taken your things there too?'

'I moved there the day you went into hospital.'

'Why?'

'What's the point in living in our house all alone?'

'The point is that it's your home. Couldn't you be bothered to keep it running even for such a short time?'

'I don't understand what you are so annoyed about. What difference does it make?'

After all the other visitors had left, Shri came to see her. He stood hesitatingly at the door until she caught sight of him and said, 'Shri, how nice to see you. Come in.'

'I am sorry to be so late, but I didn't want to come when you had other visitors.'

'Whyever not?'

'They might have thought it strange for a single man to visit you.'

'What's strange about that? Why shouldn't you want to come and see a friend who has just given birth to a baby? What has your being single got to do with it?'

'You are too straightforward a person to understand what I mean. Let it go. How are you feeling?'

'Perfectly fine.'

'How is the baby?'

'Take a look.'

'He is awake. Can I pick him up?'

'On one condition. That you promise not to say he looks like someone.'

Shri said, holding Rahul and looking at him, 'Can't I just say he is beautiful?'

'By all means. Nothing pleases a mother more, even when she knows he looks like Frankenstein.'

'But he is beautiful. He has such a delicate skin. And blue eyes. And light hair. Lighter than yours.'

'It will probably all change. Many babies have blue eyes when they are born, but that's not their true colour.'

'Does hair colour also change?'

'Often. This is not real hair, it's just baby fuzz.'

He put Rahul back in the cradle and put a small package beside him.

Ann said, 'What's that?'

'A small present. One must never come empty-handed when one comes to see a new-born baby for the first time.'

She unwrapped the package and found a small silver wati and spoon.

She said, 'Shri, you shouldn't have. It must have cost a fortune.'

'You must never protest about the expensiveness of a poor man's gift,' he said quietly.

18

The room which Ann and Ravi had occupied before, was thoroughly cleaned and freshly distempered. All unnecessary articles of furniture, books, papers which might catch dust, had been removed from it. Only one of the beds remained and a beautifully made swinging wooden cradle was added.

Ravi was outraged at being banished from the room.

'I can understand the reasons behind the taboo, but damn it all, I am not about to make a sexual assault on you.'

Ann was amused. She said, 'It's not just that. You are not supposed to distract me. This is a period when I must belong wholly to Rahul, not have any other demands on me, emotional or physical.'

He looked at her suspiciously. 'You don't really believe it, do you?'

'Actually I do, to a point. In any case, you shouldn't complain. You are the one who's strong on traditions.'

A woman was employed specially to bathe the baby and give Ann an oil massage.

'What's that for?'

Aai said, 'Childbirth is a traumatic experience for the body. Afterwards, it needs restoration, toning up. That's what we believe. Try it for a few days at least. Then you can give it up if you want.'

This willingness to give in, to admit the possibility that Ann might not go along with her ideas, to allow her the freedom to reject them, was something new.

Ann said a few days later, 'The massage certainly feels good. Actually, it's a passive form of exercise.'

Aai was very pleased with this interpretation, and repeated it to every visitor.

Ann absolutely refused to be confined to her bed or even to her room. However, she was delighted to find that special

bland food was cooked for her. She was told that spices go into the milk of a nursing mother and can cause the baby indigestion. She thought wryly that it was all right for her to have indigestion, but the baby must not be allowed to have it.

She was aghast at the baby's bath. He was placed on the maidservant's stretched legs and given a vigorous oil massage. Ann protested, 'She will rub his skin off.' Her mother-in-law said, 'Babies aren't as delicate as they seem.' Ann had to admit that he seemed to enjoy it. Then warm water was poured over him, while he lay first face up and then face down on the woman's legs. Ann thought that he would get water in his nose and mouth, but Aai assured her that he wouldn't. Lacking any other surface on which to put him, this seemed a convenient and safe way to bathe him, but Ann decided that as soon as she got home she would get a plastic tub for his bath.

It was certainly much pleasanter to live with her in-laws when she was accepted and treated like one of the family. However, she was fully aware that it did not represent a change of heart. Her mother-in-law was simply responding to a changed situation. A disliked daughter-in-law was to be treated with kindness and consideration when she became the mother of your son's son. Ravi's mother had not suddenly become fond of her; she probably never would. Basically she was a cold and unforgiving woman, who would command respect but never affection. She ruled her household with an iron will. Although they were not a large family, technically she and her husband were the heads of a large kin group, and at any gathering of this extended family, they were accorded the deference due to this position. As must happen in any such group, there was a lot of squabbling and backbiting, and Ravi's mother participated in it, yet at the same time managed to rise above it. The comments she made about various absent relatives sounded more like pronouncements than like petty faultfinding.

Ann was not intimidated by her as almost everyone else was, and just because of it, she knew that she couldn't live with the older woman for any length of time without getting into a confrontation with her. She saw that Ravi seemed quite prepared for a long stay in his parents' house.

When she broached the subject he said, 'So soon?'

'It's been a week. I feel perfectly fit and anxious to get home. Aren't you?'

COME RAIN

'Sure, but I thought you are supposed to take it easy for while.'

'For a while doesn't mean longer than a couple of weeks. And I don't have to do any heavy work. I have help.'

'Okay, if that's what you would like.'

'Wouldn't you like to go home, Ravi? You say okay, as though you were humouring me. Don't you have any preference in the matter? Or is it all the same to you whether you stay here or in your own home?'

'This is also my home,' he said.

Ann had another reason for wanting to leave soon. She had noticed that Uma and Mahesh were a little jealous of the attention lavished on Rahul. Mahesh said once, jokingly, 'Now that Aai's favourite son has a son, her cup of happiness must be full.' And Uma casually mentioned to her that there was a perfectly good cradle stored in the loft, one that her children had used, but of course Ravi's child must have a specially made new one. Again, the tone was bantering, but not quite. Ann had no wish to get involved in family jealousies.

Her mother-in-law said, 'You can't go so soon. We haven't had the naming ceremony yet.'

'Then let's have it soon.'

'You can't have it on just any day. We have to find an auspicious day.'

When the auspicious day was found by the family priest and the invitations sent out, Ann asked, 'Can't we invite Mohini?'

Her mother-in-law was so taken aback that she didn't know what to say, and simply stared at Ann.

Ann pursued her advantage, 'Wouldn't you like to? After all she is your daughter. And she has not committed any crime.'

Mrs Gogte only said, 'We'll see.'

She did send Mohini an invitation. Since there wasn't time to send invitations by post, a list was made and a circular sent round by hand. Mohini's signature was on the circular, but she didn't come. This was naturally construed as an insult by her mother.

Ravi said, 'Why did you do it?'

'Do what?'

'Insist that Aai invite Mohini?'

'I didn't insist. I only suggested, and I had a right to suggest that someone be invited to the naming ceremony of my baby.'

'But she didn't come.'

'That's her privilege.'

'You should have known that she wouldn't come and it would put Aai in a false position.'

'If loss of face matters more to her than Mohini, then she deserves to be put in a false position.'

Ravi wished that Ann would leave well alone something that didn't directly concern her. After all, Aai had gone out of her way to be nice to her, and she should have reciprocated by keeping out of what was not her business.

What Ann did not mention to Ravi was that Mohini had sent a note with the boy who had taken the invitation. It said, 'Thank you for the invitation—I take it that it was your idea. But I will not come to Aai's house unless she accepts Prem and invites both of us.'

If Ann had mentioned this, it would probably have drawn forth an angry reaction. However, Ann felt that Mohini was actually reinforcing what her mother believed. Her parents' acceptance mattered to her and she hoped eventually to get it. There was no tradition here of cutting your umbilical cord. As Ravi kept telling her, 'You can't apply your values to us. Your society has been built on fluidity, your whole thinking is based on the possibility of breaking down barriers, while our society has functioned for thousands of years by keeping them intact.' The stability and basic sanity of the Indian society was based on this. The strength of the social fabric lay in the fact that over the centuries important changes had taken place and it was flexible enough to allow them, and still it retained its essential character. It was a society that fought every change. With the increased opportunities for men and women to meet, with the increasing marriage age of educated people and their mobility, quite a few people married partners of their own choice, some of them with complete disregard for caste, social position, religious affiliation, nationality. Yet, though these marriages were more or less accepted, they were not, and would never be, considered the norm.

Ann's mother-in-law did not talk to her about Mohini or accuse her of putting her in a false position. During the naming ceremony and afterwards, she remained considerate and even affectionate with Ann. And when Ann and Ravi left for home, she saw them off with smiles and many admonitions and mountains of luggage

full of presents and boxes of *ladus* made with special ingredients to help increase Ann's milk. Ann smiled to herself to think that in their relationship the advent of Rahul had introduced a new phase. And her mother-in-law was smart enough to realize it. Ann's smile deepened when she realized that this thought had occurred to her so naturally, so casually. Only because she had, if not assimilated, at least understood, the context which made it valid.

19

Mrs Gogte had advised Ann to retain the new maid-servant at least for a few weeks, and though Ann had protested that she could certainly manage to look after the baby by herself, she had followed the advice. Her mother-in-law had said, 'It's not a good idea to start doing everything yourself too soon. You will tire yourself and then your milk will decrease.'

Just as, earlier, she was supposed to take care of herself for the baby which was growing inside her, feeding on her, now she was supposed to take care of herself for the sake of the baby growing outside, but still feeding on her. She told Rahul, 'You had better grow nicely, my darling, because I am giving you myself, and the giving should turn out to be worthwhile.'

Rahul was a satisfactory child. He slept a lot, cried very little, nursed vigorously and started gaining weight very soon. Ann did dismiss the maid after a few weeks, but she still found that she did not have enough to do, and felt bored, especially as she couldn't leave Rahul alone and go anywhere unless Laxmibai was there. She longed for company and was overjoyed to see Usha one afternoon.

'You are like a drink of water for a parched throat,' she said. 'Where have you been? Why didn't you come for the naming ceremony?'

'These ceremonies are so silly.'

'Oh, they are quite quaint.'

'You wouldn't think so if you had to go through hundreds of them and waste your time in meaningless ritual.'

Ann smiled. 'Maybe. But I am so glad you have come. It's such a pleasure to have an intelligent adult to talk to.'

Usha laughed, but Ann thought she didn't look well. She looked even more gaunt than usual.

'Have you been sick or something?'

Usha shook her head.

'But something's the matter,' Ann persisted. 'You are not your usual self, somehow.'

'It's nothing. Let it go. Tell me about yourself. How are you?'

'I am in the pink of health, as you can see.'

'And how is Rahul?'

'Who told you what we have called him?'

'Ravi.'

'Oh?'

But Usha didn't explain. She only said, 'It's a nice name. Doesn't sound like your mother-in-law's choice.'

'It's Mohini's.'

'That explains it.'

Usha took a look at the baby, but showed no further interest in him, and Ann was glad enough of it. These days it seemed that visitors were interested only in Rahul, and the bulk of conversation revolved around him—his looks, colour, eating and sleeping habits.

'Now tell me what's bothering you,' she said.

Usha looked at her as though considering what to say.

'What's happened?' Ann persisted.

'Well, to be concise and to the point, someone saw me and Arun in a compromising situation and reported to my mother-in-law.' She gave a short laugh. 'It wasn't what you might think. We were in the University garden. Probably sitting with our arms around each other. I should have been more careful, knowing my in-laws. But there isn't any place for us to meet and be with each other, and—well, when you've been used to a man, you get hungry even for a simple touch.'

Ann said, gently, 'There's nothing wrong with that, Usha. You don't have to give me any justification.' There was a glint of moisture in Usha's eyes and Ann knew that her defences

were really down. She had never seen Usha in a self-pitying mood.

'Anyway, no justification would be sufficient for my mother-in-law. She immediately said that I was a woman of bad character and was ruining her family's so far blemishless reputation, that she would be perfectly justified in kicking me out of the house. I said all right, I would take Rasika and get out. She told me she would not allow Rasika to go with me. If necessary, she would make an application to the Court that morally I was unfit to be her mother, and demand custody.'

'I don't believe she could do it, Usha. I can't see a court granting custody of a child to others simply because her mother was seen around with a man. Especially a man she intends to marry.'

'You don't know people here. This kind of a plea would probably go down very well in front of some fuddy-duddy judge. And my father-in-law is a lawyer. He'll find a way to get what they want. They have always wanted to kick me out and keep Rasika.'

'At least get some legal advice.'

'I intend to. But there's Rasika to consider. I don't want to drag her through courts.'

'I am sure no judge in his right mind would submit her to a court appearance. And ultimately sometime, unless your in-laws can be made to see reason, you are going to have to fight them on this. You are not planning to give up Rasika, are you?'

'No, of course not.'

'Then why don't you marry and apply for custody of the child?'

'Because I am not sure I will get it. I even considered taking Rasika and simply going away. But she would bring a kidnapping charge against me. You don't know how far that woman will go, just to get back at me for stealing her son away from her. And the most ironical thing is,' Usha smiled her crooked smile, 'that she was bitterly disappointed when Rasika was born, because she was a girl.'

'Oh my God, how can people be so cruel? What are you going to do now?'

'For the time being, continue to live with my in-laws and stop seeing Arun.'

'How long can you continue like that?'

'I don't know.' She was suddenly in tears, which she dashed

away angrily. 'After all the fighting and shouting and recriminations, the only thing I want is peace.'

'But at what price? What does Arun say?'

'He will have to wait. How long, I don't know. Right now I don't want to look that far ahead.'

Suddenly, Ann realized that she knew nothing about Arun. Usha rarely talked about him or volunteered any information about him. Ann only knew that he must be a patient man, to agree to wait indefinitely to marry, in the dimly foreseeable future, a widow who was also the mother of a child. She wondered what his family had to say about it. Unlike the heroes of many Hindi movies, he must have a family, and Ann couldn't imagine that they approved of such a liaison for their son. She decided that this was not the time to question Usha about him. And for some reason she desisted from offering her house as a meeting place for them.

Usha said, 'I had better go. If I am away too long, she will be suspicious. But I'll come again soon. Thank you for having the patience to listen to my tale of woe. Just talking to you has made me feel so much better.'

She took a rupee coin from her purse, put it in Rahul's hand and closed his fingers around it.

She said, 'I didn't have time to get a proper present.'

'You know it doesn't matter.'

'I know, but ingrained traditions die hard.'

'I thought you were the rebel who didn't believe in the traditions.'

'Well, there are some traditions which are so much a part of you that they are difficult to shake off. And not as harmful as certain others.'

In the evening Ann told Ravi, 'Usha came to see me today. Her mother-in-law has discovered Arun's existence and threatened to—'

'Yes, I know.'

'How do you know?'

'She told me. I ran into her one day when I had stopped on the way home to pick up some shopping.'

'You didn't discuss this during a chance meeting on the street or in a shop.'

'No, we had a cup of coffee at Ruchira.'

'You never mentioned it.'

COME RAIN

He shrugged. 'I didn't think it was important.'

During dinner Ann reverted to the subject of Usha. 'What I can't understand is why she came to stay with her in-laws at all, or has continued staying with them.'

'She had no place else to go to.'

'She could have got a job and lived independently.'

'That's easy enough to say. Jobs are not so easy to get. And there was Rasika. Besides, she must have felt pretty near panic, with the shock of her husband's sudden death. She was probably in no state to think things out calmly.'

She thought, he is very quick to jump to her defence. And then she thought, good heavens, I am surely not jealous. So what if he saw her and didn't happen to mention it, or if he defends her against implied criticism? They are old friends.

She said, 'It's time for Rahul's feed.' She changed his wet diaper and picked him up. She was surprised to find that she was tense, and tried to relax and concentrate on the nursing child, savour the sensation. It was such an indescribably lovely feeling, like nothing she had ever experienced. It was worth the discomfort of being too full at times, and overflowing, and her clothes getting messy. She was sorry that Ravi would never experience it. One night he had complained, 'You always smell milky,' and she had laughed and said, 'It should remind you of your infancy.'

Ravi also complained that Rahul took up too much of her time and attention and she had laughed off his complaints, kidding him that he was behaving like the neglected father described in the books. Now she wondered whether she should take him more seriously. One night while they were sleepily and desultorily talking about nothing in particular, Rahul had given a wail. Ann had hopped out of bed, muttering a curse under her breath. When she came back she said, 'What were you saying?' Ravi said, 'I don't remember.' His voice was curt and though she tried, she could not recapture the earlier mood. She wondered whether these little things mattered to him. Perhaps she had been wrong to assume that they were as trivial to him as they were to her.

She put Rahul in his crib and changed into her pajamas, taking care to sponge her breasts and nipples clean and putting on a fresh bra.

Ravi was in bed reading, and she lay down beside him with her head on his shoulder. He patted her a little absently.

'Ravi.'

'Um?'

'Put your book away.'

'Why?'

'Because I want to love you.'

'Well!'

'Do you know how long it's been since you put your arms around me or kissed me?'

'I thought there was supposed to be an embargo on intercourse for six weeks.'

'We are not talking about intercourse here. Ravi please. Don't you love me any longer?'

'Of course I love you.'

'There's no of course about it. You sure don't show that you love me.'

'How am I—'

'There's no embargo on kissing, damn you. Let's try it, okay?'

She took the book away from him and threw it on the bedside table. She started kissing him, tightening her arms around him, exploring his mouth with her tongue. She felt his arms come round her, hold her tight, felt his hardness against her.

She whispered, 'Ravi, let's. There's nothing sacred about six weeks.'

He was not difficult to persuade, but their love-making left her feeling curiously flat, and she was sure that his reaction echoed hers. Afterwards he didn't say anything. She wished he would talk, so that they could share their disappointment. She wondered why it had not been possible to recapture the delight they had always taken in each other's body. Nothing that she had read had led her to expect this. Was it just that their life had suddenly acquired a new dimension and they had not been able to adjust to it yet?

Did Ravi feel that her body which had borne and delivered a child could never seem the same to him again? Did it disgust him? Or was there something—a lack of response, a self-sufficiency, a smugness perhaps—which put him off? She felt a little scared that maybe Rahul's birth was going to mean more far-reaching changes than she was prepared for.

20

Although Ravi would not work for one of his father's enterprises, he was not above being given preferential treatment in being allowed to buy an old Fiat belonging to one of the companies at a written-down, which meant ridiculously low, price.

One day while the parents in-law were visiting—as they often did these days, to see Rahul—father and son got into one of their never-ending arguments about young men settling abroad and Ravi said, 'All right, I admit that part of the attraction is money.'

'So now after all these days you are honest enough to admit it,' his father had said.

Ravi had responded hotly, 'It's no crime to want more money. Indians are so holier-than-thou about American materialism, but show me a man here who doesn't want to earn more money, to better his prospects, to have a higher standard of living. The only difference is that in America anyone who is willing to work hard can achieve these goals, while here you can't. No matter how hard they work, the majority of people will never earn enough to be able to own a house, a car, a TV. But that doesn't mean they don't want to own these things. Then why blame the ones who can escape from these deprivations and go live in a society that can give them a better life?'

Ravi's father had said, 'Why did you come back then, if you think life is so much better there?'

'I didn't know what it would be like here. I was out of touch.'

'Then you can go back. No country needs reluctant citizens.'

But only a few days after this conversation he had told Ravi that he was selling this car. Would Ravi want it? It was in quite good condition. Ravi said he would be happy to have it, and insisted on paying for it. Ann was amused at Mr Gogte's ambi-

valence which led him on the one hand to resent Ravi's justifying the brain drain, and on the other to offer Ravi sops so that he would have fewer grounds for complaint. He seemed to be saying, in effect, 'Here's a car, if that's all you need to keep you happy and keep you living here.'

Ann had not particularly felt the lack of a car earlier, but after Rahul was born, she had thought that it would be nice to have a car. She was very happy with the Fiat, which she called a cute little car. Ravi said, 'Wait till you ride in it. That will make you think longingly of American cars. Comfort for the traveller is just about last on the list of priorities of the Indian car manufacturers.'

One day Ann said, 'I've got a wonderful idea. Why don't we go for a picnic this Sunday?'

'Where?'

'What about that fort Shri had mentioned? Do let's go. We haven't been out anywhere for so long. Let's call Shri too, and Usha and her daughter.'

'The baby will be cranky.'

'He won't. He'll love it. And if he does cry, I'll look after him. You won't have to.'

Finally he agreed. She was very excited when they started, after loading the car with food and Rahul's clothes. Ravi kept saying, at every bump, 'You see what I meant by riding comfort. Neither the roads nor the cars are built for it.'

Finally Ann started laughing. She said, 'Darling, you have made your point. Now why don't you just relax and enjoy yourself? It's not really that bad, is it?'

'Do you know why the roads are so bad? Corruption. The contractor uses only part of the materials he is supposed to use, and sells the rest for personal profit.'

'It's the same everywhere,' Shri said. 'In an economy of shortages, everything is saleable.'

They were at the foot of the hill in an hour.

Ravi said, 'Anybody want to go up on foot?'

'If Rahul hadn't been along, I wouldn't have minded giving it a try,' Ann said.

'It's quite a stiff climb,' Shri said.

'Have you done it?' Ann asked.

'Half-a-dozen times.'

'Count me out,' Usha said. 'I don't believe in physical exertion for its own sake.'

COME RAIN

Ravi started the car. Ann was enchanted with the vistas that opened up as they climbed the winding road. They kept glimpsing people walking up the much shorter footpath.

'There seem to be a lot of enthusiastic walkers,' Ann remarked.

'This is a popular day-long trip for Sangampur people. There are buses that come as far as the foot of the hill,' Ravi said.

'Now a lot of people also drive up,' Shri said, 'as you will find when we reach the top.'

They discovered that a car could not go all the way up. The last few hundred yards was a rocky escarpment, with a wall around it and a gate.

Usha said, in dismay. 'I thought we could drive all the way up.'

'If you don't want to walk up, we can stop right here,' Ravi said. 'There's a nice place to sit under that ledge.'

'Oh come Usha, after having come this far, you are not going to make me go back without seeing the fort, are you? It can't be very far to walk up, is it, Ravi?'

'Not very far, as far as I can remember.'

They collected all the bags and baskets and started up. Usha wore chappals with a flimsy V-strap and high heels, and was having a hard time walking on the rough ground. Ann couldn't help a flash of annoyance. Even if it was a drive-up fort, flimsy chappals, a delicate tereylr sari and full make-up did not constitute a suitable get-up for this kind of an outing. She herself was dressed in denim pants and a blouse with buttons down the front for convenience of nursing Rahul.

Around the second bend they saw the gate. Rough stone-cut steps led to the gate and when they went through it they were in the fort proper.

Ann said, 'Ah, this is more like it. Now we can get some of the feeling of having climbed on foot.'

'Now,' Usha said, 'Let's find a nice shady spot and put all the stuff down. Then I'll stay and guard it while you people walk around.'

'Don't you want to see the fort?' Ann said.

'Not particularly. Besides, it's become too hot and these are not very comfortable to walk in.' She pointed to her chappals.

Ravi said, 'I'll keep you company.'

'I'll stay, Ravi,' Shri said. 'You go with Ann.'

'Look,' Usha said. 'There's no need for anyone to keep me

company. I've brought a book and I'll just sit here quietly and read. I don't mind a bit.'

Ravi said, 'Frankly, I'd rather sit than walk. I am not such an enthusiastic walker. Why don't we all just be lazy and sit down and have some coffee?'

'I want to see the fort,' Ann said.

'Okay, go ahead then. Shri will be a much better guide than me, anyway. You can leave Rahul here. I'll keep an eye on him.'

Usha said, 'Can Rasika come with you? She's too full of energy to want to sit and listen to adult conversation.'

'Sure,' Ann said shortly.

When she didn't say anything for a while Shri who was having to walk quite fast to keep pace with her said, 'You are angry.'

'Yes. And it's unfair to take it out on you. I am sorry.'

'He would have come with you, if you had asked him to.'

'Maybe, but I didn't want him to on those terms. But let's not talk about that. Tell me about the fort. Is this also a Shivaji fort?'

'Actually it was built long before Shivaji. like most of these forts. He later used them. Historically or strategically speaking, this was not a very important fort for Shivaji, but there's been a kind of romantic legend built up around it. I'll give you something to read about it if you are interested.'

They looked at the ruins of some old buildings, and the supposedly impregnable cliff which Shivaji's men had scaled to conquer the fort, and climbed up on one of the bastions.

Shri said, 'There's a fanciful story connected with this bastion. Long ago an eccentric king who ruled this area announced a prize for anyone who could fly. The prize was to be the land covered by the flight. A dancing girl took up the challenge, tied two winnows to her back and flew. She flew so far that the king began to be afraid she was going to win his whole kingdom. He had her killed by a cannon shot from this bastion and then awarded the land up to the spot where she fell, to her heirs. This is called the dancing girl's bastion in her honour.'

'Quite a story,' Ann said. 'This mixture of cold-blooded cruelty and the sense of fair play which made him award the land to the heirs is simply fascinating. You know, when I know enough Marathi, I would like to read a lot of myths and legends and other folklore. That tells you a lot about a people.'

'Do you know the script now?'

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'Yes, but I'll have to practise a lot to achieve any kind of speed. I made a lot of progress quite fast, but lately I haven't kept up with my practice. Unfortunately, too many people here know adequate English, so I am always tempted to follow the easiest path and stick to English. But I am determined I am going to make a special effort now.'

They had come to the mouth of a cave

'What is this?' Ann asked.

'It's a man-made cave.'

'What's in it?'

'Water. Come in and look.'

'It's very dark.'

'You'll get used to the dark in a minute. Close your eyes for a few seconds, then open them.'

'It is water. Not very clean water.'

'In the monsoon when the rock-springs flow it's cleaner. Do you see there's a dry path here, if you edge along the wall to the right?'

'Yes.'

'Do you think you can negotiate it? It's dark but not dangerous.'

'I think I can manage.'

'Then go ahead. Slowly, feeling your way along the wall. I'll carry Rasika.'

They inched along. Ann said, 'It's kind of scary.'

'It's not really. If we had a flashlight you would see that.'

Suddenly at the darkest point in the path they turned a corner and came upon a sort of a temple. It was crude, with just an image of Shiva carved into the rock. What was remarkable about it was that it was bathed in light. Not bright sunlight but a greenish kind of half-light which looked as though it had filtered through water.

'It's beautiful. That light effect is terrific. I wonder if it is intentional or accidental.'

'Intentional probably. The image is at a peculiar angle, as though to catch the light.'

'Who would come in here to carve an image?'

'Somebody who wanted to protect it from vandalism.'

'Would vandals destroy idols?'

'Muslims would and did. They went around systematically detaching not only idols but also carvings on temple walls.'

'Good heavens. Does it still happen?'

'Not any longer. When they did it they were the conquerors and rulers, out to prove that their religion was superior by destroying the natives' gods and places of worship. Now they live in a secular democracy where, apart from the fact that the government would punish such acts and the Hindu majority would not stand for it, that sort of thing is out of context in these times, isn't it?'

Ann smiled. 'I wish everyone believed that.'

Rasika suddenly whimpered and said, 'I want to go out. I want to go back to Mummy.'

Ann said, 'It's time to go back anyway. Rahul's feeding time.'

When they were outside the cave Shri put Rasika down and she ran about, happy to be free of the constraint of being held, and apparently also happy to be out of the cave.

Ann said, 'Thank you for being such a wonderful guide, Shri.'

'Please don't be so formal and spoil everything by thanking me.'

'But I am not being formal. I really mean it.'

'You only thank someone when you feel under obligation to him. Between friends there can be no obligation.'

'What a strange idea. I am not sure I am willing to accept it.'

'Do you know that Marathi has no casual phrase for "thank you"?''

'I've been told that.'

'There's only a very formal phrase, which means that it is intended to be used only with comparative strangers. With strangers you feel an obligation, and you express it.'

'An interesting interpretation, but I will stick to the custom that's followed in my country. I feel more comfortable saying thank you even to people who are close to me.'

Ann was thinking that it was easy to find rapport with Ravi because he had absorbed the American way of life to a great extent. But this same quality prevented between them this sort of interaction which happens between people who look at the same thing from culturally different viewpoints.

'You certainly were a long time,' Ravi greeted them. 'We almost started eating.'

'You should have. Why don't you take out the plates and serve? I'll change Rahul and feed him.'

'Did you enjoy seeing the fort?'

'Oh enormously. I think the battlements and bastions are quite impressive.'

'Are they? I thought they are mostly in ruins, like all historical monuments in this country. We care nothing about preserving them.'

Shri said, 'Well, the money which will be required for the maintenance of all our historical monuments can be better spent on something more useful.'

Ravi said, 'Oh, that argument is too trite, Shri. As though we don't waste money on many things which are totally useless.'

'I suppose you are right,' Shri said. 'Still--'

'And preservation of such monuments also serves the very important function of imparting a sense of history—which also we care nothing about.'

Ann said, 'An Indian sociologist who taught a course once in our college had an interesting theory about that. She said that Indians don't care about the past because they live in it. There's a continuity to life, so that you can't draw the line between past and present. At many levels people live in exactly the same way they used to live a hundred, two hundred, five hundred years ago, so they don't feel there's anything worth preserving in the past.'

Usha said, 'That's mere sophistry, Ann. For instance, people don't build forts nowadays.'

Ann said, 'Oh I agree you can't take it too literally. All the same, there's some core of truth in it.'

'Who was this?' Ravi asked.

'I can't recall her name now, but I think she was a Maharashtrian. A brilliant woman. Incidentally, my interest in India dates back to that course.'

Rasika said, 'Mummy, we went into a cave, and I was scared. It was so dark.'

Ann said, 'Ravi, have you seen this perfectly marvellous cave and the temple at the end of it?'

'Yes. It's just a crude image carved in the rock. Nothing very special as far as I can remember.'

Ann looked up to see Shri looking at her with an amused smile.

She put Rahul down and said, 'Pass me a plate, somebody.'

21

Ravi met Anoop Singh who was a management consultant called in by his company. This was, Ravi thought, the latest fad. Companies called in consultants to do efficiency studies and work-load studies and motivation studies and give long reports full of recommendations which didn't do anybody any good. It only served to make the employees feel ruffled and insecure. Or perhaps that was the purpose.

Ravi approached his interview with resentment and wariness, but found Anoop Singh relaxed and friendly. Ravi realized that the man was very smart and very skilful. He carried on an apparently casual conversation and inserted key questions cleverly, noting the answers and watching closely the man he was interrogating. During the course of their meeting, they discovered a common factor. Singh also had an American wife. The interview ended with Ravi inviting him and his wife to dinner the following Saturday.

Ann was very curious to see Mrs Singh. She turned out to be fortyish, tall, slim, smartly dressed in a tailored sleeveless dress, her straw-coloured hair showing marks of a recent visit to a beauty parlour.

'I see you have adopted the native dress,' she said a little drily. 'Do you feel comfortable in it?'

Ann, reddening at the condescension in her tone said, 'Oh yes, very.'

'I can't imagine how anyone can, with those yards and yards of material floating around.'

After debating with herself over the menu, Ann had decided on rice and chicken curry. followed by an apple pie and ice cream. Mrs Singh ate very sparingly, which Ann construed as a criticism of her cooking. However, her husband made up for it by eating heartily and giving lavish praise.

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'Apple pie!' he exclaimed. 'Just like being back in the States!'

Mrs Singh said, 'You'd think, to hear him, that he has not tasted apple pie since leaving the States. But our cook makes it several times a month, because it's Saheb's favourite dessert.'

Even she must have realized how ungracious she sounded because she added, 'This is good, though. Do you do your own cooking?'

'Usually.'

'I gave it up long ago. Now we have a full-time cook. If you have to live here, I figure you might as well enjoy the best thing this country offers—all the household help you want, for a paltry sum of money.'

During dinner, Ann called Laxmibai to tell her something.

Mrs Singh said, 'You seem to know Marathi well.'

'Hardly.'

'Did you learn it since coming here?'

'Yes. Do you know any Indian language?'

'Just a smattering of Hindi, that's all.'

'You never learned any Indian language?'

Mrs Singh laughed. 'You sound so shocked. But it's a losing game, you know. How many languages are you going to learn? I just made up my mind to stick to English, and found I could manage very well without knowing any Indian language.'

'With English, you can communicate with only a very few people,' Ann said.

'All the ones who matter.'

'That's a matter of opinion,' Ann said mildly. 'And the children? Do they know any Indian language?'

'No. They know only English.'

'Don't you think they are losing something? Not knowing any Indian language, they can't be very well acquainted with Indian culture.'

'The way the world is going, one particular culture has no meaning. What earthly use will it be for the kids to learn the Punjabi language and culture, for instance? They may never live in Punjab.'

'It would still give them an anchor in life, something that they belong to.'

Anoop said, 'I think we have to change our ideas about that, Mrs Gogte. We are, I think, developing a world culture, a sort of conglomerate of the important cultures, and this is the one all the elite will belong to in the next generation.'

'I think that's very well put,' Ravi said. 'There's going to be so much mobility and mixed marriages, that it's not going to be easy to decide what culture your children belong to, or should belong to.'

Ann said, 'These are practical problems that each person will have to resolve for himself. In any case, I don't agree that being brought up in one particular culture makes a person insular, or that a person not so brought up is necessarily more liberal, or more adaptable. And really there's no such thing as a world culture. It's just a word. Your so-called world culture doesn't give you a special concept of life. That is what belonging to a culture is supposed to do for you. It doesn't matter what that concept of life is, it is what makes an integrated person out of you.'

Mrs Singh said, 'You are an integrated person so long as you continue living in that culture. As soon as you go outside, you become a misfit.'

Ravi said, 'Look, you were brought up in the American cultural milieu and you feel like a misfit here. Why else are you making such an effort to learn Marathi and know something about the culture?'

'It's only because I don't want to remain an outsider, communicating on a superficial level only with people who can speak English. I want to be part of the community in which I am living, be able to speak their language, understand their manners and customs, their mythology and history, lead a meaningful life. That's entirely different from being a misfit.'

'You are contradicting yourself,' Mrs Singh said.

'Not at all.'

Before Ann could say anything further. Ravi quickly suggested that they move to the living room for coffee. He tried to confine the conversation to innocuous topics during the rest of the evening. But just before they left Mrs Singh said to Ann, 'My dear, you wouldn't believe it now, but when I first came here, I was a dewy-eyed romantic too, like you. But you find it impossible to keep up the enthusiasm in the face of what you find here. Everything is worse than your worst expectations—dirtier, poorer, shoddier. The diseases seem more horrible when there's a chance that you may catch them. If you are weak, you can't take it. You just give up and run. But if you are reasonably tough, you learn to insulate yourself, and end up being what you've always been fated to be, a white-skinned privileged foreigner.'

Ann did not agree with the sentiment, and did not think that she herself was a dewy-eyed romantic vulnerable to quick disillusionment. However, she could not help liking Mrs Singh's candour.

When they came in after seeing the Singhs off, Ann was about to remark that she liked Mrs Singh, but Ravi said, 'Isn't she a charming woman?'

'Do I detect a wistful note in your voice?'

'What do you mean?'

'You would like me to pattern myself on someone like her.'

'I suggested nothing of the sort. You are imagining things because you feel guilty.'

'Why should I feel guilty?'

'For behaving so badly.'

'I behaved badly?'

'Yes, over this business of language and culture.'

'I merely expressed my opinion. If you'd only think about it, Ravi, you'd see that world-culture means nothing. It's just a word used to express a negative idea, an unwillingness to learn anything about the country in which you are living.'

'You think you know all the answers.'

'Not at all. I am quite willing to listen to a convincing argument.'

'You sure didn't show your willingness all evening long. You were so aggressively know-it-all that nobody else could get in an argument.'

Ann was aghast. 'You don't really think that, do you?'

'Well, that's the way you projected yourself.'

'How about Mrs Singh? She was so snooty and so patronizing. That's also a kind of aggressiveness, only you prefer not to see it.'

'I see one thing, that I'd better not call any of my friends or colleagues home to dinner.'

'Now that's really unfair.'

'I was so embarrassed at the way you practically lit into the woman.'

'Well, I'm sorry. If you think just one argument negates all the planning and work that went into making the evening a success, there's nothing I can say in my own defence. In future when you bring visitors I will remember to be the meek housewife who has no opinions of her own.'

'That's not what I mean, and you know it. But if you want to put that interpretation on my words, you are welcome to do so.'

'Ravi, for God's sake, it was only a theoretical discussion over dinner. People don't take that sort of thing seriously. Why are you making such a fuss about it? If you really think she was offended, then I am sorry, but I can't imagine anyone being offended over a dinner table conversation.'

Ravi didn't say anything, and started getting ready for bed silently.

Ann said again, 'I am sorry. I so wanted the evening to be a success. I like having people over.'

'It's all right, Ann.' Then he added, 'I wish you weren't so full of poses. Why can't you just take life as it comes without taking a theoretical stance about everything?'

'But that's exactly what I try to do, Ravi, take life as it comes.'

'If that's so, why are you in such a hurry to get Indian citizenship?'

She had asked him some time earlier what she would have to do to apply for citizenship. His reaction had been complete amazement, and he had dismissed her question as just a whim.

She said now, 'I don't see what that has to do with what we are talking about, but why shouldn't I want to get citizenship?'

'What it has to do is that it proves that you like to take poses. And as for why shouldn't you, a more pertinent question would be why should you?'

'If you had lived in the U.S., wouldn't you have got American citizenship?'

'They wouldn't have let me continue to stay there unless I was a citizen. But as my wife you can stay here as long as you want without becoming a citizen.'

'I don't want to live here indefinitely as a *foreigner*. I want to be involved with the life of the country.'

'You can be involved without becoming a citizen.'

'Not really. People don't take you seriously. They feel resentful if you criticize anything, for instance. I can see it in their eyes.'

'Do you have to find fault with anything here? They consider you an outsider.'

'Does it matter? I think you should think about this a little. You will have to put up with all the angles. You will have to put up with them as an Indian citizen.'

'I have to keep up with them as an American citizen. I have to keep

renewing my visa, and report to the police if I leave town. There are places where I won't be allowed to go.'

'On the other hand, you will find it difficult to travel abroad.'

'Thousands of people travel abroad all the time.'

'Yes, but it's a hassle getting passports, visas, all kinds of permissions. A lot of countries are very reluctant to grant visas to Indians. America is one of them.'

'I have thought about all these things, Ravi, and I still think taking Indian citizenship is the right thing for me to do.'

'Okay, it's your life. But I think it would be a mistake. It's a big step, and you are rushing into it impulsively, and you will live to regret it.'

She did not tell him that when he had made no move to find out anything about the citizenship, she had appealed to her father-in-law who had immediately and happily got the necessary forms and information for her. He had also said that it was very commendable that she should want to get Indian citizenship, and that there would be no problem in getting it, as he had certain contacts in the Home Ministry and would write to them at the appropriate time.

22

'What do you hear from your mother?' Ravi asked when he saw her mother's letter.

'She has finally found an apartment she likes and is planning to move soon.'

'That's good.'

And Jack is married.'

'Ah, finally. Who is the lucky girl, as the saying goes?'

'Ruth Polanski. You remember that pretty girl who was with him the first time you met him?'

'I remember very well. She wasn't with him, she was all over him.'

'That's the one.'

Later while they were having dinner she said, 'It's strange that Jack wouldn't have written about it himself.'

'Oh, so that's what's been bothering you.'

'What do you mean that's what—'

'I knew something was bothering you. I thought maybe you were regretting not having married him yourself.'

Ann started laughing. 'Oh no, now don't start all that again. Why would I regret now, after all this time?'

'Because now he's married. While he was unmarried, there was always some hope.'

'Ravi, you can't seriously mean it.'

He smiled.

'My God,' she said, 'I was beginning to think that you meant it.'

They did not talk about it any more, but a sense of unease stayed with Ann, the kind of unease one feels when things don't dovetail.

She and Jack had lived in the same neighbourhood. She had been in love with him when she was in high school. He was older—a tall, rangy, bespectacled college sophomore whose speech was full of cynical observations but whose manner was full of easy friendliness. They ran into each other occasionally at the supermarket or drugstore or a delicatessen patronized by the student community. Their meetings never went beyond the exchange of a few pleasant innocuous remarks, and although she wove her private fantasies around him, he was never interested in her. She was just a 'good kid', not very pretty, and too brainy.

Then he went away to the Columbia school of journalism and when he came back to work for the San Francisco News, he rediscovered her. She was still not pretty. Her nose was too large, her chin too prominent, her eyes too close-set. But she had a good figure, excellent legs, and a directness of manner all of which combined to make her an attractive girl. They enjoyed many of the same things and began to spend a lot of time together. At some point in their relationship they simply began to assume that some day they were going to marry. Neither had specified when that day would come and Ann was content to leave it that way. Once in a while they wrangled about it in a goodnatured fashion, Jack urging her to set the date and she refusing to be pinned down.

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Slowly he became more insistent. Ann was at the time, after doing a master's degree in education, finishing a special study project on the learning problems of disadvantaged children. Then she went on to a job with the California Board of Education preparing special teaching materials for children who belonged to ethnic, linguistic or cultural minorities.

Jack felt that they were now both at a point at which they should marry and settle down.

He said, 'Ann, it's ridiculous to waste all this time when we could be together. Why can't we marry?'

'I don't know Jack, I just don't feel ready yet.'

'Nothing need change for you, you know, so long as we don't have children. And we won't until you feel you are ready to '

'It's nothing to do with that.'

'Then what does it have to do with?'

Finally Ann knew that she had run out of excuses, or really, that the time for excuses was long past. She thought seriously about their relationship, about the future, about what she wanted out of life. There was only one possible answer she could give Jack, and that was 'no'. She enjoyed his company, and it would have been pleasant to have continued their relationship, but in fairness to him she felt she had to end it.

When she told him this they were at his apartment where they had gone after a concert by a folk singer whom they both liked.

For a moment, stunned, he simply stared at her. Then he gave a little laugh and said, 'Well, at least it's different from your usual answer.'

She didn't say anything and any hope that he might have had that she was joking, faded. He said, 'Why not, Ann? And don't say it's because you've known me all your life. That's too corny '

'But that's just it, Jack. Don't you see? I have this suffocating feeling that I am travelling a predetermined well-travelled route. I don't want to. I want something different out of life.'

'Such as what?'

'I don't know. I haven't thought it all out yet.'

'But whatever it is, you are convinced that you can't get it by marrying me. Ann, don't you see, honey, your life is what you make of it.'

'I believed that too, but now I am not so sure. It's something you tell yourself to still the small protesting voice inside. But

it's not easy to break out of the pattern. Once you take the first step you let yourself in for the whole bit. Marriage and a couple of kids and a bigger house in a better neighbourhood and a higher-paying and more prestigious job, and the search for an exclusive and out-of-the-way place for a holiday—only when you get there you find that there are hundreds who thought of it first. And the hell of it is, if you have the guts to swim against the stream, you still find yourself in plenty of company. Maybe it is the curse of mass-communication, but in our society there are patterns even for the non-conformist.'

'Where are you going to find the Utopia in which there are no patterns? Every society has its own patterns. And anything new you want to try has already been done by a thousand people in a hundred different ways.'

'Please Jack,' she said unhappily, 'don't badger me. I can't answer your questions. I haven't even thought it all out myself. I only know that feeling as uncertain as I do, I can't commit myself to marriage.'

'Ann, don't you see, it is only a feeling of being trapped, for which I don't blame you. But I promise life won't be a dull routine for us. In a few years, I'll try for a foreign assignment. We'll travel, see new places, new people. We won't go after the bigger house in a better neighbourhood.'

She kept shaking her head, not looking at him.

'All right. All right, I won't badger you. I won't say anything about marriage until you have sorted out your feelings. Okay?'

Ann thought in panic, no I can't accept that. When I leave here, I want to be free.

She said, 'Jack, there's nothing to sort out. Don't you understand? I simply don't feel I want to marry you.'

'Ah, so now we come down to brass tacks. Instead of all those pretty-sounding reasons, why didn't you just say you no longer love me? That's what it amounts to, doesn't it?'

She thought, yes, he is right. That's what it amounts to. If I had loved him enough, all the rest of it probably wouldn't have mattered.

'Tell me,' he went on, 'can you pinpoint the moment when you stopped loving me? Or was it sort of gradual? Or did you never love me?'

If Ann had had some vague idea about a friendly parting, she had by then given it up. She was sorry he was taking it so hard,

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but relieved that it was over, that she would now be free of the nagging feeling that this marriage would be all wrong, and not just for the reason that Jack had finally mentioned.

Perhaps it was only that she wanted to step into the unknown. She had not been aware, while the process was going on, how strongly she was repelled by the known world, by the thought that she would one day become part of it. Perhaps it was this that made her particularly vulnerable. Whatever the reason, the attraction she felt for Ravi was sudden and powerful. The getting-acquainted phase of their relationship was telescoped, so that later when she thought back to this period, she could barely recall the time when they had not known and loved each other.

Ravi had been in the U.S. for several years, and had absorbed the cultural milieu to an extent which, combined with his foreignness, made him the perfect companion for Ann at the particular point in time when he entered her life.

One day Jack called her up. 'Honey, instead of giving me all that spiel, why didn't you just tell me there was someone else?'

'What are you talking about?'

'I saw you with him the other day.'

'Oh. That must have been Ravi. He's an Indian I met, actually quite accidentally. Mrs Price had invited him for the weekend and then was suddenly called out of town. So my Mom had him over.'

'Very neighbourly. I hope you had an exciting weekend.'

'Yes, I did,' she said spitefully. 'How was yours?'

'Glorious. I got plastered. In other words, stoned, pickled.'

'Don't be melodramatic.'

'What's melodramatic about that? Lots of people do it to drown their sorrows.'

'Oh for God's sake, Jack.'

'I only want to know why you didn't level with me.'

'About what? Honestly Jack, he's only a friend, if you can call it that. I don't know him very well. And I didn't even meet him until after I had broken off with you.'

'Very convenient that you had.'

'Yes, wasn't it?' She said angrily and banged down the receiver, immediately regretting her action because it would give him the satisfaction of having been able to rile her.

Some time later she and Ravi ran into Jack at a performance of a dramatization of Forster's *A Passage to India*. Jack was

with Ruth, a pretty, dark, vivacious girl who was extremely conscious of her good looks. He had occasionally dated her before Ann became his steady companion. She was good fun, full of superficially intelligent chatter and always ready for a laugh. She used to tell Ann, 'Any time you want to drop Jack, just let me know and I'll be there to catch him.' Ann had felt that her banter in fact hid the hurt of Jack's rejection.

When Jack saw Ann, he elaborately put his arm around Ruth's waist and she played up by clinging to him. He steered Ruth to Ann. Ravi already knew about Jack and Ann saw interest spring into his eyes when she made the introductions. Throughout the show Jack and Ruth, who sat a few rows ahead of Ann, petted in a manner which was impossible to ignore. Ann felt mortified.

Ravi only said, mildly, 'I thought the guy was supposed to be engaged to you.'

'He isn't', she said shortly. In a way she was glad that he had learned this. Ann's mother, perhaps sensing the attraction Ann felt for Ravi, had gone out of her way to bring up Jack's name and let it be understood that he and Ann were engaged to be married. Ann had not disclaimed this, because Ravi had indicated that the information was of no special interest to him. However, she hoped that it would not keep him away, and had been relieved and happy when he had called and invited her to go to the play with him.

Later Ravi had told her that he had almost made up his mind that he wanted to marry her the first time they met, and Jack's presence on the scene would not have deterred him from trying. She asked him why he had not let on that he was interested in her and he had said, laughing, that it was all part of the tactics.

Late on the night of the play Jack called her up.

'Don't hang up on me, Ann. I only called to say I am sorry. Can you bring yourself to forgive me?'

He sounded drunk. She gently cradled the receiver, more because she found it difficult to hit upon an appropriate response than from any wish to punish him by silence.

As she had expected, he called again in a few seconds. 'It won't work,' he said. 'I'll just keep calling until you say you forgive me.'

'All right, I forgive you. Now will you hang up and let me go to bed?'

'Ann, please—'

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'Goodnight, Jack.'

This time he didn't ring her back. The feeling of guilt stayed with her like a gnawing pain.

He called her once more, after hearing that she was getting married.

'I hear that congratulations are in order.'

'Thank you.' She didn't know what more to say.

'I hope you know what you are doing, Ann. I mean, you don't really know very much about this guy, do you?'

'I know as much as I need to.'

'As much as he chooses to let you know, you mean. There may be things you won't find out until it's too late. He may even have a wife tucked away at home. I knew a fellow—'

'Everyone does,' she said calmly.

'Eh?'

'I said everyone does. It's amazing how many people know foreigners who commit bigamy with American girls.'

'I only—'

'Why are you doing this, Jack?'

'All right, I am sorry. I had only meant to call and congratulate you, honest. I always have to go and spoil everything. So, congratulations. And I hope you'll get that something different you wanted in life.'

'Thank you, I am sure I will.'

'And I hope you won't get more than you bargained for.'

She let him have the last word, and felt less guilty about him.

Ravi once asked her, 'Were you really engaged to that newspaper chap?'

'Sort of.'

'When did it break up?'

'A few weeks before I met you.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. One of those things.'

'But there must have been some specific reason.'

She sighed. 'It's difficult to explain. We were good friends, we shared a lot of interests, liked to do things together. And I guess it was an easy progression from this to marriage. As far as I was concerned, it was something in the distant future. The moment it became a definite event scheduled for the very near future, I began to feel that I was being trapped into something I

didn't want. I knew that I didn't want to formalize our relationship by marriage and commit myself to the sort of life it would imply.'

'What sort of life would it imply?'

'What I consider the standard American family life, I suppose.'

'What's wrong with it?'

Nothing wrong with it, if you believe in all the things it stands for. What it stands for is expressed in the concepts to which we attach the highest value—bigger, better, newer, faster, more powerful, and so on.'

'These are the concepts that have made America a great nation.'

'Yes, but they have also, I think, brought us to a point of diminishing returns. Up to a point, striving for bigger, better and so on, is fine. But you can't endlessly define human striving in these terms. Sometime or the other you should reach the optimal level where you stop striving, or strive in other directions. But we have become trapped in the bigger-better ethic and no longer know how to get off the treadmill. The only ones who do get off are dropouts, like the hippies, or the drug-addicts. I think the things that made America, as you say, a great nation, no longer have validity, and our refusal to realize this is what has vitiated our way of life.'

'This is all very interesting,' Ravi said. 'An insider's view of America. To people like me who are looking in from outside, it still seems a great way of life.'

'It does to many Americans as well. But there are a few like me who want a way out.'

'So,' he said, 'in effect you are marrying me to escape a life of misery in this country.'

Ann started laughing.

Once after they were married Ravi had asked her, 'Did you ever sleep with Jack?' When she didn't answer he said, 'Of course you must have. I don't suppose this generation of Americans thinks making love is anything more special than kissing or petting.'

Ann had merely smiled. He had repeated the question in various guises on different occasions until she finally said, 'I wish you'd stop asking me because I am not going to tell you.'

'Why not? Your answer won't make any difference to us.'

'Then why do you want to know?'

'Just curiosity.'

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'Well, I am not going to satisfy it. If I answer no, you won't believe it, and if I answer yes, you won't leave it at that.'

She knew that one of the reasons Ravi was so concerned was that Jack's name kept popping up in conversation. But he *had* been so much a part of her life that this was inevitable. The intense pervasive emotion she experienced now had been absent from what she had felt for Jack. Nevertheless, there had existed between them a warm and enjoyable relationship which she did not want to dissect for Ravi's benefit.

After coming to India she wrote to Jack. It was a short letter which did not say much, was meant only to reestablish communication. Jack wrote back immediately, saying how happy he was to receive her letter. 'Let me take this opportunity to do something I've been wanting to for a long time—apologise for behaving so badly. My only excuse was that things happened so fast that I didn't know how to face up to them with good grace. Looking back, I feel that I should have seen it coming, but I loved you so much that I chose to be blind. It was unthinkable that I should lose you, and when I saw it happening, I lost my balance. Please accept my apologies and my most sincere wishes for your happiness.'

Ann was touched by the letter and wrote back a long chatty one about her experiences in India. Strangely, the letter brought no response. Jack's letter had apparently been meant to get his guilt out of his system. She felt like a fool. The next she heard about him was of his marriage.

She tried to compose a letter of congratulations but could not achieve just the right words to express polite interest and nothing more. After throwing away a couple of drafts she thought, the hell with him. If he didn't bother to write to me about his marriage, why should I feel any obligation to send him my best wishes?

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Rahul was nearly six months old when Ann faced the fact that she had allowed herself to fall into a pattern which she had always despised. In the beginning she had the excuse of having to make many new adjustments. Then she became pregnant. Then she had the baby to look after. Even from an objective point of view, there had been sufficient justification for idleness. The end result was still not acceptable. She had allowed herself to become the epitome of the suburban housewife whose life ends when her husband leaves for work, and begins again when he returns.

Somehow the full force of the horror of her image as a flaccid, contented housewife came home to her the day she received a postcard from Jack. It had been mailed in Honolulu and said that he was on a holiday-cum-work trip, with a flexible schedule. He eventually aimed at reaching the Middle East via India, and sometime during the next six months she could expect to find him ringing her doorbell.

She had this imaginary conversation with him.

‘Well, Ann, what are you doing these days?’

‘Nothing yet, but I am planning to. I was so busy finding my feet in a new country—’

‘I see.’

She could see the gleam in his eye, the sardonic curl of his lip. Then she smiled at her fancy. Jack was not coming to India with the specific purpose of examining her lifestyle with a critical eye.

Actually she had tried to think about the kind of job she might be able to get, and had not come up with anything. She had talked to Ravi about it but he had just thrown out a couple of suggestions without any practical help.

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One day at her in-laws' place she met a friend of her mother-in-law's who had come to sell tickets for a Bharata Natyam performance which was being staged for the benefit of a charitable organization.

Ann said, 'Oh I would love to see some Indian dancing,' and her mother-in-law bought two tickets for her. Now that Ravi was earning and Ann had money to spend, her mother-in-law often overrode her protests and insisted on spending for her

Then Ann got to talking to Mrs Velankar and asked her what sort of charitable organization this was. She said it was a trust called Samaj Seva Sangh which worked in all kinds of fields—literacy, family planning, creches. She herself worked part-time on an honorary basis, as did many other women who did not need to earn. But they also had a staff of full-time paid workers.

'If you are interested, why don't you come and visit our place sometime?'

'I would like to.'

Ravi said, 'What on earth do you want to do with the Samaj Seva Sangh?'

'I might find some work there.'

'God forbid.'

'Why?'

'Ann, you can't be seriously thinking of taking up social work.'

'Why not?'

'It conforms too much to the image of the missionary. You know, the white Christian women who can't make good in their own countries coming here under the guise of helping the suffering black humanity and then lording over their converted flock.'

Ann laughed. 'Well, I don't know how much of a Christian I am, in the strict sense of the word. It's better to be a Hindu in a way. You don't have to examine your conscience before saying you are a Hindu, because it can mean nothing or everything. Anyway, Christian or not, I am certainly not interested in converting anybody. I am just looking for something to do. And what about the dark-skinned Hindu women who work there?'

'Idle rich women who need something to fill their leisure hours,' he said contemptuously.

'They could fill their leisure hours with worse activities. They are doing good work, work that needs to be done. So what are you sneering at?'

'They could direct their energies towards their families with better effect. Your Mrs Velankar's son keeps failing in college, refuses to work, and spends his time on the sports ground or in cafes with a gang of hangers-on who sponge on him. What's the use of doing social work and allowing your own children to become delinquents?'

Ann asked unbelievably, 'Are you actually saying that her son is a delinquent because she does social work?'

'Well, I suppose what I am saying is that she has always neglected her children, never bothered to give them enough time or direction while they were growing up.'

'I can't believe this. Are you advocating that women not work at all?'

'No, taking a job is different. At least it has some justification.'

'The justification being money.'

'Yes.'

'Well, I am sorry Ravi, but I can't go along with you. First of all, I refuse to concede that there is any simple cause and effect relationship between a working mother and delinquent children. And I can't see what difference it makes whether a mother works for money or without pay.'

Ann went one afternoon to see the social welfare centre run by the Samaj Seva Sangh. She was quite impressed with their range of activities. They had a family planning advisory service which also made arrangements for fitting loops and doing tubectomies. They kept a register of unskilled women who needed employment, and tried to place them, mainly as household servants. They sponsored training programmes for teaching women simple skills which could help them earn money in their spare time.

What most interested Ann was the nursery for pre-school children of working women. She decided to work in it for two hours a day.

Ravi said, 'I can understand that you want to do something. But can't you find something worthwhile?'

'Why isn't this worthwhile?'

'If social work achieved anything, our society would have changed.'

'That's an arguable point, but I'm not going to argue it. For me, this is simply a job.'

'For which you don't get paid.'

'Why do you evaluate everything in terms of money?'

'Because that's what's wrong with voluntary social work. It's only a spare-time toy, not something to be taken seriously. And since you are obliging them by working for free, nobody bothers to see if you are qualified to do the job.'

'I don't know if what you say applies to everyone who is working at the centre, but it doesn't apply to me. I am trained to teach small children. And they certainly don't want me to look upon the job as a spare-time toy. I have been told that I must report to work at a specified time, and stay away only after informing them. They have to know they can count on you, it's not just a haphazard arrangement.'

Ann's mother-in-law said, 'Why don't you drop Rahul off at our house when you go to work and pick him up on your way back? I would be happy to look after him.'

'Thank you Aai, but it's really not necessary. It's just a couple of hours, and it's best not to disturb him every day. He has his routine and Laxmibai is quite reliable and very good with him.'

It was politely delivered, but a snub nonetheless, and apparently Mrs Gogte complained to Ravi about it.

Ravi said, 'Why don't you take her up on the offer?'

'There's no sense in disturbing his routine every day, Ravi. He has his schedule and special foods and naptimes, and I really think taking him back and forth every day would be unnecessarily upsetting to him.'

'You are too rigid about his schedule. Young children can be quite flexible.'

'But I don't think there's any point in it. Besides I don't like the way children are treated in your family. Nobody respects a child's rights at all. They think nothing of picking up a child who is fast asleep or playing happily because they feel like playing with him, or want to show him off to a visitor. And they have no idea about proper nutrition for a child. Your father keeps giving Rahul sweets and if I protest he pays no attention at all. He merely says a few sweets can't hurt a child.'

'So can they?'

'Of course they can and do. They spoil his appetite, and get him into the wrong kind of eating habits, spoil his teeth.'

'Oh I know the theory Ann, but on the practical level--'

'It's no good arguing about it, Ravi. I won't give in, because I

have certain ideas about child-rearing, and unless proved wrong, I am not going to give them up.'

'It wouldn't hurt you to do such a little thing when you know it will make my mother very happy.'

'There you are. The consideration is not what's best for Rahul, but what will make someone else happy.'

'Are you saying that it will be bad for Rahul to be with his grandmother for a couple of hours?'

'Yes, on a daily basis. Because your mother and I have conflicting ideas and they will only confuse the child. I am sorry if I sound very selfish, but I want to bring him up my own way.'

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During the interval Ann saw Pathak walking up the aisle towards them. She was struck again by his grace.

She said, 'Look who is here, Ravi.'

Pathak said, 'I saw you when you came in, but the curtain was about to go up so I didn't come to say hello.' He said to Ann, 'You are drinking in some Marathi culture, I see. What do you think of the play?'

'I am enjoying it. Of course I have no criterion to judge by, but it's certainly a very polished performance.'

Ravi said, 'I must say I am impressed.'

Ann said, 'Maybe next time I won't have to nag you quite so much to see a play.'

Ravi had seemed not at all interested in any form of entertainment. They had seen a few Hindi movies and then he had rebelled.

'It's such utter drivel. How can you stand it?'

'She agreed, although she found it interesting to see how, through people, places and stories which did not seem to approximate to real life, the movies managed to reinforce

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traditional ideas and beliefs.

When she suggested that they go to see a play he said the Marathi theatre was as elementary and childish as Marathi movies. Finally she had been able to drag him to this play which Mohini had seen and highly recommended. It was a political satire which unfolded through a story about an imaginary country. Various folk art forms were used to present it.

Pathak said, 'This director is one of the great names in Marathi theatre today. She experiments with all kinds of new techniques and themes. Generally if it's one of her plays it's likely to be good. Or at least good enough to give you something to think about.'

Ravi said, 'You seem to know a lot about what's going on on the Marathi stage.'

'The theatre is one of my passions. I usually try to plan my Sangampur visit on a day when there's something good playing. Often I am disappointed because plays as satisfying as this one are rare, but I still find it good entertainment.'

Ann said, 'Do you come here often?'

'About once a month.'

'But you have never taken us up on our invitation.'

He laughed. She liked the sound of his laugh. It was joyous, without any overtones, almost like a child's laugh.

He said, 'I plead guilty. I usually come for a very short time and have a long list of things to do. You know, I am one of those people who live in a village but have their umbilical cord stretch all the way to the nearest city. But you are not quite accurate. I have seen Ravi a couple of times.'

'Ravi, you never mentioned it.'

'What's there to mention? It was only in connection with work.'

He turned to Pathak and said, 'When do you want me to come again?'

'Any time next week.'

'Are you going back to his village?' Ann said.

'Yes, to take observations of the latest trials.'

'Why don't you come too, Ann?'

'I have a job now. And a baby.'

'You can come on Sunday, and bring the baby along. That solves both problems. You can stay at the house while Ravi

goes round the farm.'

'Thank you. I'll think about it.'

Ann had had this feeling before, but the meeting with Pathak brought it back, that there was a lot going on in Ravi's life which she had no knowledge of, and he intended it to be so.

She asked Ravi again later, 'How come you never once talked about him?'

'Why on earth should I have?'

'Well, after all, I had met him and might be interested.'

'You knew we were going to take trials on his farm. Naturally I would have to meet him in connection with that, wouldn't I?'

'Still, you could have just casually mentioned having met him here in Sangampur.'

'I don't tell you everything that happens at work.'

'That's it. You never talk about your work. Why not? Don't you feel any need to share things with me? Why are you so secretive?'

'Come on, Ann, how does it make me secretive if I don't tell you about something unimportant?'

'But you don't tell me about anything important either.'

'What, for instance?'

'You didn't tell me that you were thinking about a new job.'

'I wasn't thinking about it. It was just a remote possibility.'

'Still, you mentioned it to Usha. And I learned about it only because she asked you in my presence and you couldn't avoid telling me then.'

'I told you it must have slipped my mind.'

'That's as lame an excuse as you can have.'

He suddenly shouted, 'All right, I don't tell you things because you don't just listen. You always have to give advice or make some comment or criticize me and I don't like it. I want to run my life my own way, without your interference.'

Ann was stunned into silence. So she was right. He didn't want to share his life. He didn't want a discriminating listener who would offer intelligent comments or dare to criticize his actions. He wanted a passive listener who would at most offer sympathy. She couldn't and wouldn't convert herself into one.

Ravi was abashed when he didn't get any response. He had expected a fight but she refused to oblige him.

Finally he said, 'I am sorry. I didn't mean it. I don't know what got into me.'

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She could have said that one didn't say things like that without meaning them, but she had no heart for further argument.

For the next few days he seemed to go out of his way to be nice to her, to try to talk to her more, trying to make up for having hurt her. Somehow it left her cold, although she tried to respond to his gesture by being pleasant and desisting from making any statement which might be construed as criticism. She felt as though they were playing the roles of husband and wife instead of really being a couple.

Ravi planned his visit to Sandane, Pathak's village, on a Sunday and asked Ann if she would like to go along.

'What do you think, Ravi? He must have come to Sangampur a dozen times since we met, but he has never bothered to come to our house. I don't know whether to accept his invitation or not.'

'It's entirely up to you, Ann. If you think you would enjoy it, come along. I wouldn't worry about his not letting you return his hospitality.'

Ann decided to go. It would be a nice outing for her and Rahul. They went out so rarely. Ravi didn't seem fond of outings, though in California they had gone so often for drives and picnics.

They started early and it was cool and cloudy, but by the time they reached Sandane the sun had come out and it was already quite warm. Although it was late in June the monsoon had disappeared after making a false start.

Pathak was out in the field and Ravi went to look for him. Mrs Pathak welcomed Ann warmly and brought her a tall glass of lemonade beaded with moisture.

Ann said, 'You have ice?'

'Oh yes. We have a refrigerator. Mohan insists on every modern convenience. He says just because we live in a village there's no reason why we should live in a primitive fashion. We even have a generator for when the electricity goes off.'

After showing Ann the study where she might find a book to read, Mrs Pathak left her to her own devices. Ann was glad that she hadn't felt obliged to stay and entertain Ann. She looked at the books with curiosity. Pathak's collection had a very wide range of books. She was especially interested to see that his agricultural library included several very recent publications and also journals. Obviously he liked to keep up with the latest

developments in his field. She knew comparisons were insidious, but she couldn't help thinking of Ravi who hadn't bought a single book since coming to India. She hadn't seen him reading any of the ones he had brought with him. He complained bitterly about not getting an opportunity to work in his chosen field, but did not try to keep up with what was happening in it. Did his interest depend solely on being able to work actively in it and was turned off if he couldn't?

Pathak and Ravi came in for an early lunch after which Ravi would go to the other sites. There was a slight tension between them and Ann wondered why. It occurred to her that Ravi had no real friend, except perhaps Usha. There was nobody with whom he had a relationship of sharing. He had tried to pick up the threads with old college friends and failed. But he had not tried to make new friends. Perhaps there had not been enough time, but this was just one of the many things which made his life here unreal, as though he related to people only through a glass wall. But then, she did not remember him having any friends in the States, either, none that he had introduced her to.

Pathak said, 'I see you have found something to read.'

'I feel like a starved person suddenly presented with a feast. I don't know what to read. All these books and magazines.'

He laughed. 'You can borrow some to take home if you want.'

Ravi said, 'You must have a lot of time to read. I don't suppose you have much social life here.'

'Not much. Occassionally some friends from Sangampur come to visit, or some of my numerous relatives. But mostly, after working hours I read, write, listen to music.'

'What do you write?' Ann said.

'Articles for agricultural publications, or small pieces for the Bombay Natural History Society's periodical or one of the newspapers.'

'You write in English?'

'Also Marathi.'

Ravi left shortly after lunch, saying, 'I'll try to come back as soon as possible.'

She said, 'Take your time. Don't hurry back on my account. I'll manage to keep myself occupied.'

Pathak said, 'What would you like to do?'

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'Please don't disturb your routine for me. I would be quite content to sit and read. You carry on with whatever you usually do.'

'I usually rest for an hour or so before going out again, sometimes listen to music. Would you like some music?'

'Oh yes.'

'What kind?'

'What do you have?'

'I have almost everything. Indian and Western classical music, Hindi film songs, American pop, you name it '

'Do you have Dick Reed?'

He put on a record, and leaned back in contentment, eyes closed.

When it was finished, she said, 'You have a good system.'

'It's one of my many indulgences. I like all the good things in life. Good books, good music, good food.'

'Yet you are quite content living here in a simple primitive village.'

'Is there a contradiction?'

Ann laughed. 'You are right. Not necessarily.'

When he went out again Ann said she would like to accompany him.

'What about Rahul? He doesn't walk, does he?'

'No, I'll carry him. And even if he did walk, it will be a long time before he is able to walk well enough and fast enough to accompany us on a round of the farm.'

He looked a bit shamefaced. 'I have no experience of small children.'

'How is it you have not married?'

'There's no intention behind it. It just hasn't happened, that's all. My mother now and again tells me that I'll have to live a lonely life after she is dead, trying to scare me into marriage.'

'Obviously you don't scare easily.'

'I am not scared of living alone. Oh I agree it might be pleasant to have a wife for a companion, but I am afraid the kind of girl I would consider marrying probably wouldn't want to come and live here.'

Shri had said the same thing to her once, that he wouldn't want to marry the kind of girl his parents found for him, and the kind of girl he would want to marry wouldn't be willing to

come and live with his family in a small village.

'Did you actually ask a girl who said no or have you just accepted this on a theoretical level?'

'Well, there was a girl. Actually it was not all that serious, but it could have become serious. However, quite early in our relationship I discovered that she would never consider living outside a big city. In fact, she considered me some kind of a nut or a recluse to have chosen to settle in a miserable village. She couldn't believe that it was for keeps. So that was the end of that.'

'Did you wish that you had chosen to live in Sangampur?'

He smiled, 'No. I have never regretted my decision to settle here.'

Ann said suddenly, 'There's that bird again. What on earth is it? It is a bird, isn't it?'

Mohanish laughed. 'Quite a bizarre call, isn't it? That's a hawk-cuckoo or brainfever bird.'

'Brainfever bird? Did I hear you right?'

'You did.'

'Why in the world is it called by such a strange name?'

'The story goes that the call of this bird used to drive the British memsaabs hysterical. They thought it cried "brainfever, brainfever". We call it the rain bird. It starts calling just before the monsoon and, they say, heralds rain. It's supposed to say *paosa ye*, which means—'

'I know what it means—come, rain, like in the nursery rhyme.'

'Okay, so you must realize that to us a bird which calls for rain is very welcome. In a predominantly agricultural country which gets only seasonal rain, rain is life, quite literally.'

'British women must have been either stupid or insensitive.'

'I am glad it doesn't drive you hysterical. But then, you don't seem the sort who is prone to hysterics anyway.'

She looked at him quizzically.

'To go back to what we were talking about, what about your decision to come back here, to India I mean?'

He looked surprised. 'There was never any question in my mind about coming back. I could not have stayed there.'

'Why? When so many of your countrymen would give their right arm to be able to stay there?'

'Let me ask you a question. Do you respect those who settle

in the U.S.?’

‘I don’t condemn them.’

‘You haven’t answered my question.’

‘Well, no. I wouldn’t respect them as much as if they came back. Even though it’s probably illogical, that’s the way I’d feel.’

‘There you are then. That answers your question. But there are other reasons too. The biggest factor is, I guess, that I am an independent sort of man. And—this might seem strange and contradictory to you but it happens to be true—there are many more opportunities in this country for a man to do something independently. Put up a small industry, do your own farming, open a shop, anything. In the U.S. the big guys swallow up the small man. He can’t possibly compete with them. Whether it’s the corner grocery store owner or the small entrepreneur or the farmer. Even farming is mostly done now by large corporations who have holdings of thousands of acres. The little man has no place in this scheme, unless he is part of a big enterprise. Well, that isn’t the kind of life I would like to lead. I like being my own boss, doing things my own way. And that’s another thing which might seem contradictory on the face of it, but I feel that our society, tradition-bound and rigid as it is, doesn’t demand as much conformity as the American society does. Once you set yourself outside their system, they let you live by your own rules. Yet they don’t throw you out of the mainstream of society.’

‘Have you ever had a chance to say any of this to Ravi?’

‘The subject never came up. Why?’

‘I don’t think he’s been very happy since coming back. Of course in the beginning he used to gripe a lot about the dirt and poverty and so on, but in time you become immune to that. Now his dissatisfaction seems to be mainly with his work.’

‘He seems to enjoy it.’

‘He doesn’t. He thinks he is wasting his knowledge and training. He wants to be able to work in his field and is getting discouraged that he can’t find the right job. He is even considering going back to the States.’

‘Look, work is one of the standard reasons given by people who go abroad and don’t want to come back, but I have always thought that it’s only a cover for a deeper maladjustment. Most of them wouldn’t hesitate to branch out into something different

if they were staying there.'

Ann was silent and he said, 'Forgive me if I seemed to criticize Ravi. That was not my intention at all. I don't know him that well. From what I have seen of him, I have a great deal of respect for him. He is thorough and conscientious in his work. I was just making a general statement and I don't know if it applies to him.'

Ann shook her head and said, 'It probably does but I don't know why. You are right. Although he complains about his job, his dissatisfaction is deeper, wider. And I don't know what it is that makes him unhappy. He was so enthusiastic about coming back. I don't know what went wrong, why he has given up trying to make things work.'

She stopped, aghast that she had been discussing Ravi with this stranger. If Ravi knew or even suspected, he would be furious.

Pathak said, gently, 'Don't worry, Ann. Whatever has been said between us won't go beyond me.'

She was amazed that he was sensitive enough to her to have guessed what she was thinking.

He said, 'What about you? Are you happy here?'

'You mean his discontent may be only a reflection of mine?' She smiled. 'I am happy here. Does that surprise you?'

'No. It depends on the kind of person you are.'

'I am glad to hear you say that. I get so fed up with people who think that living here is a brave and adventurous thing to do.'

He looked at her speculatively, and smiled. It was a real smile, meant for her, and it warmed her.

He went on ahead then, and she followed more slowly, showing Rahul the birds and the chickens and the bullocks. *She thought how nice it would be to bring up a child on a farm. In a city you are deprived of so much of the world. She watched Pathak in the distance. She wondered what he really thought about her living in India. If he believed that you should stay where your roots are, he must consider her decision incomprehensible, except in traditional terms. But he didn't seem like a traditional man. She couldn't tell what kind of man he was. It was difficult to get to know him.*

Suddenly she heard a great commotion. Somebody was screaming, people were shouting. Pathak came running and

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said, 'A man has been bitten by a snake. I have to take him into town.' He ran to the house and backed his jeep out of the shed and drove it past her, giving her a wave. She turned back and started towards the house. She told Mrs Pathak what had happened and asked, 'Are there a lot of snakes here?'

'Yes, one or two people get bitten on the farm every year.'

'Do the snakes just wander about at any time of the day?'

'More at night than during the day. But they are there in dark places or heaps of fodder and bite someone who accidentally touches them or steps on them.'

'Is a snake-bite very painful?'

'I imagine so. I have never been bitten.'

They were surprised to hear the jeep back so soon. Pathak came in, saying, 'He didn't want to go to the doctor.'

'What do you mean?' Ann said.

'He doesn't believe in the efficacy of modern medicine. Actually I have a snake-bite kit here, but he didn't want any treatment. He wanted to be taken to the Mahadeva temple where there's a mantrik who is supposed to cure snakebites.'

'Does he?'

Pathak laughed. 'You can say he does. Since most of our snakes are non-poisonous, the cure is effective. Occasionally, when the snake is poisonous the patient dies. But since the proportion of cures is quite high, the man's reputation remains unsullied.'

'Didn't you try to persuade him to go to the doctor?'

'It wouldn't have done any good. I learned that long ago. Their beliefs in such things are unshakable.'

'You mean if the snake was poisonous, he will die?'

'Yes.'

'How awful.'

Pathak shrugged. 'You have to let people live—or die—by their own beliefs. If you claim that freedom, you have to allow it to them.'

Ann couldn't help being shocked at his lack of concern. It seemed callous. Yet she had to admit that his reasoning was probably right, and expressing concern at the man's fate would really have been hypocritical. It was a harsh lesson, but, she thought, a useful one.

Pathak seemed to her full of contradictions, yet he was an integrated person. He was not aware of any contradictions in

himself, nor any doubts about his convictions.

His mother brought tea. Ann said, 'I understand that you have done a lot for the villagers.'

'I have not done anything for them.'

'Shri was telling us about an irrigation lift you have built.'

'That's for myself. You see, I found that my well doesn't have enough water to irrigate all my land round the year. So I thought of lifting water from the river. Now the cost of a jackwell, pipes, engine, pump would be astronomical for one person. So I got together a group of farmers who have lands near mine, and we decided to share the costs. I got all the actual work done, but it was all basically for myself.'

'And what about all the money you gave for their school, and temple?' his mother asked.

He smiled. 'My mother prefers to think of me as the benefactor of the village. But I'll tell you a secret. I live here more or less as an outsider, because by education, inclination, background, I am completely different from the people around me. Although I believe in none of their social and religious traditions, I give money to their temple, I contribute to the annual fair. All these things are a small price to pay for not being resented too strongly, and being left in peace to follow my own way of life.'

Ann said, 'You go to a lot of trouble to prove that your motives are not altruistic.'

He shook his head. 'I am not out to prove or disprove anything. I only want people to know the truth, which is that if I seem to do something to help the people who are my neighbours, I do it for my own ultimate benefit. I am neither a do-gooder nor a social reformer. I leave people alone, respect their right to their own beliefs so long as they respect mine, and we manage to live together quite amicably.'

'You have made your point.' She smiled, but felt a little uneasy, as though he was trying to convey something more than his words seemed to. But what? Hands off, I am a strictly no-involvement man?

By the time Ravi came to pick her up it had started raining.

Mohanish said, 'You must come more often, you bring luck. We have been wanting this rain badly.'

Ann said laughingly, 'I didn't bring it. It's the bird who brought it.'

Ravi said, 'You are taking all those books? It will take you

months to finish them.'

Pathak said, 'You can keep them as long as you like.'

For some reasons Ravi did not seem pleased about her taking the books, but he put them, along with the bag with all of Rahul's stuff in the car, and then they got in.

On the way he asked her, 'Did you have a good time?'

'Oh yes, a marvellous time.'

She told him about the man bitten by the snake and he said, 'That's typical. We claim to have gone into the twentieth century, but the bulk of our population prefers to put its faith in superstition rather than in modern medicine.'

'You know, when I heard of it, I thought, how awful if he dies without availing himself of modern medicine when it is within his reach! But afterwards I wondered. Modern medicine doesn't offer one hundred per cent cures for all ills, either. And often when it cures something, the side effects are almost as bad as the disease. So why not stick to something you have faith in?'

'That's nonsense. People of the civilized world like to imagine that the people of underdeveloped countries have some innate wisdom which serves them in place of science.'

'Maybe they do.'

'What you call wisdom is only a set of superstitious beliefs which render these people unfit for survival in the modern world.'

'How do you determine that?'

'From the fact that they do die by the thousands, like flies, from malnutrition, hunger, disease.'

'But that is also because of conditions imposed on them by others.'

He looked at her, then turned his attention back to the road and switched on the headlights.

She could feel his irritation through his silence.

She said, 'What's bothering you?'

'Me? Nothing.'

'Something is, though. You have gone suddenly silent. Can't we have a difference of opinion about something without your getting annoyed with me?'

'That's got nothing to do with it. I am just tired, Ann.'

She looked at his profile sadly. There seemed no way to establish communication with him. She shifted Rahul, who

was asleep, so as to make herself more comfortable, and watched the rain coming down hard, splintering into millions of shards of light by dashing against the car.

Suddenly Ravi said, 'You acted as though we are an uncivilized lot who don't even have any books in the house.'

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'I have news, Ann. Prem's got a job.'

Mohini was not an exuberant person, but her eyes danced, her face was creased in a smile that it almost could not contain.

'Wonderful. Where is it? What is it?'

'Somewhere in Madhya Pradesh. On a dam. I don't know all the details, but Prem says the place is a forgotten corner of the world.'

'Are you going?'

'Of course. How can you ask? That's why it's such great news.'

Things had been getting more and more difficult for Mohini. Nobody actually mistreated her, but the insistence on conformity to silly customs just because they were family traditions, the snide remarks about Mohini's family and caste, and petty bickering within the family were wearing her down. And of course Prem would not consider making a separate home in Sangampur. It would hurt his parents too much. So Mohini's only hope lay in Prem's getting a job far away from home, and it had now been realized.

Ann said, 'When do you leave?'

'In about two weeks.'

'You and Prem must come and have dinner with us.'

'Ann—'

'I won't take a no this time, Mohini.'

'What about Ravi?'

'This is as much my house as his. I can invite anyone I please.'

'That's all very well, but what if Ravi decides to be rude

to Prem?’

‘I’ll see that he won’t.’

‘But why is it necessary to invite us to a meal?’

‘Are you asking me this? Indians can’t do anything without feeding people.’

Mohini laughed. ‘All right. I’ll check with Prem and let you know the day. And you are right. We are going to spend most of the next two weeks being fed by various relatives. And probably recovering from indigestion for the next six months!’

Ann told Ravi that she would like to invite Mohini and Prem to dinner.

‘So go ahead.’

‘Are you going to sit silently glaring at them through the evening?’

‘Of course.’

‘Oh darling, do be serious.’

‘Ann, anybody would think, to listen to you, that I am the most boorish, mannerless person.’

She threw her arms around him and kissed him. ‘Not boorish, just difficult sometimes. Thank you.’

‘For what?’

‘You know what.’

Ravi however, put his foot down when Ann said that she would also invite Ravi’s parents without telling them who else was coming

‘I am sure they will be happy to meet her. And if they don’t know ahead of time, it won’t seem as though they were taking the first step in the reconciliation

‘Ann, stop playing god. I know my parents. If you trick them into it, they won’t thank you. They will simply walk out and you will only succeed in spoiling the evening for everyone.’

Ann admitted that he was probably right. It was not simply a matter of her daughter having married against her wishes. It went deeper than that, had wider ramifications. Ravi’s mother, as the eldest brother’s wife, occupied a position of honour in the family. It was to her that everyone came for advice regarding marriages and births and deaths and religious observations. Naturally, she had lost face because her own daughter had not only not asked her advice, she had flouted her express wishes. In her calculations things like falling in love were totally beside the point. You married the man or woman whom your parents

in their wisdom had chosen for you, and then you taught yourself to love him or her. Or not, perhaps. Either way, it didn't matter, because a marriage was not simply a contract between two people. It was only a small part of the much larger and all-encompassing life of the family. And so she could not forgive the daughter who had not realized this and had made her the laughing-stock of the extended family. She knew that although giving her lip-sympathy, they had enjoyed her discomfiture. In their eyes she had slipped from her all-powerful position.

Ann was a little anxious about the evening, but it went very well. Ravi was reserved but pleasant, Prem friendly but guarded. As the evening wore on, Mohini visibly relaxed and began to enjoy herself. Ann asked Prem whether he had seen the place where they were going.

'Oh yes. They—the firm which interviewed us—advised us to go and see the site, inspect the quarters and facilities there before we accepted the job. Especially if we intended to take wives and children along.' He smiled. 'They didn't want any wifely gripes later.'

'What's the place like?'

'What such places are usually like. It's about thirty miles from the source of the Brinda river. Hilly country, a lot of jungle. Quite pretty but far away from any large city. There's a fair-sized village near the dam site but we will live in the dam colony which of course is an ugly collection of stone and concrete blocks with asbestos sheets for roofs.'

Ravi said, 'What will you do there, Mohini?'

'Same thing I do here. Keep house, cook, read.'

Prem said, 'I've been trying to persuade her to stay behind, especially as—' He suddenly stopped and looked abashed, then continued, 'there's nothing to do, no social life. I'll have my work, but she may get bored.' He refused to meet Mohini's eye. Ann guessed what he had been about to say, but she thought it was their secret to keep.

Mohini said, 'I'll find something to do. I haven't travelled much and I am terribly excited about going with you. So there's nothing anyone can say or do to keep me here.'

After they had left Ann asked Ravi, 'Isn't he a nice person? I can't understand what you have against him. I mean, some people are irritating, or aggressive, or uptight. He's none of these things.'

'Look, Ann, you can't expect me to like the same people you do, with equal fervour. I just don't care for that type of man. We've been over this before.'

The objectionable qualities which had emerged when they had been over it were that he was too good-looking, too smooth, his hair was too long. Ann had seen people back home condemn someone because he had long hair or a beard or was a vegetarian. Anybody who didn't conform in the smallest way to the norms they accepted, made them feel threatened, and they could never accept or like him. It was a gut feeling, and you couldn't argue them out of it. She supposed there were such people everywhere, but it made her sad to have to admit that Ravi might be one of them.

Mohini came back for a visit a few months later and Ann said, 'I had guessed of course that that was what Prem almost let slip.'

Mohini laughed. 'I just didn't want it advertised before we left, that's all. My in-laws would probably have tried to stop me going with Prem. But even otherwise, I can't see any point in going out of your way to flaunt your pregnancy.'

Ann said, 'Okay, it's your pregnancy, you have a right to keep it secret. Not any longer, though. Mohini, you are blushing. How can you be so modest about these things? I thought in this country the start of menstruation and pregnancy are widely advertised and celebrated with much ritual.'

Mohini was going to stay with Ann for a few days. Then Prem would join her and they would spend a few days with his parents before returning to Madhy Pradesh.

Ann felt that Mohini had changed, even in such a short time. She was more confident, more open, more eager to communicate. Or perhaps she had more to communicate.

She said, 'Prem has taught me so much. He has given me a whole new perspective on life. I am appalled to think what a circumscribed life I have had. I feel as though my senses were dormant and have suddenly started functioning. It is an education to go for walks with him. He has an amazing amount of knowledge about trees and birds and geological formations. He used to belong to a group of trekkers and a naturalists' club and all sorts of things. Compared to him, I feel I have wasted my life, I am so ignorant.'

Ann asked her if she was coming back to Sangampur for her

delivery and Mohini said no.

'Are the medical facilities adequate at Mahishpur?'

'There's a doctor in the colony, and a primary health centre and a cottage hospital only half an hour's drive away.'

'It's not like having a well-equipped city hospital, though.'

'You don't need a fully-equipped hospital for a simple delivery.'

'What if there are complications?'

'There won't be.'

'How can you be sure?'

'I just am. I feel so well. I've had no morning sickness, no problems. And I am going to see Dr Wad before I go back, to make sure that everything's normal.'

Ann sighed. 'I guess in your place I would have done the same.'

'Just think of the time element Mahishpur is so far away that I have to travel several hours by bus and a day by train to get here. I can't undertake that sort of journey late in my pregnancy, which means that I would have to come quite far ahead of the due date, and then stay for a couple of months after the baby is born, until it is strong enough to stand the trip. I am not anxious to stay away that long, and stay with my in-laws that long. Besides, Prem says it's his baby too, and he wants to be there when it's born, not hundreds of miles away '

Talking to Mohini, Ann felt like a person who worries a puncture wound to make it hurt. This sort of joy, this sharing was simply not part of her marriage any longer. Or had it never been? She no longer knew. And although she tried to tell herself firmly that she surely didn't expect to retain forever the ecstatic haze in which she had lived for the first few days after her marriage, she could not shake off her sense of deprivation.

Mohini went back to Mahishpur. Ann received two letters from her, the second one saying that she was a bit bored with waiting. 'I am large and clumsy, so we can't go tramping around the countryside any longer. Prem says I am supposed to sit in one place and look smug and knit things. But I can't knit, and I would hate sitting in one place. We are trying to decide on names. I somehow feel I am going to have a daughter, and can only come up with girls' names. How does Tejaswini strike you? It means lustrous, radiant.'

And then, silence.

Ann said, 'There should have been some news from Mohini by now. It's three weeks after her due date.'

'Some women go longer than the specified period, don't they?'

'Not this long, surely.'

'Maybe they just haven't got around to sending a telegram. Things must be pretty hectic.'

'It only takes a few minutes, and Prem would at least let his family know.'

'If you are so worried, why don't you send a telegram?'

Ann waited a few more days and finally sent a telegram. As these things usually happen, she received a letter from Prem the same day.

'Mohini was a week overdue and we were worried, but the doctor kept assuring us that everything was all right, and there was no cause for anxiety. Then the baby's movements stopped, and they induced labour. The baby was born alive, but died a few minutes later. Nobody can say exactly why it happened. Mohini didn't want me to let anyone know. She seems to feel that she is in some way responsible. She is very depressed naturally. I tried to persuade her to go to Sangampur and perhaps stay with you for a while, but she is very adamant. I took a few days off to be with her but now I am back at work and she is alone all day. I am really worried about her.'

Ann looked at her watch. Ravi probably wouldn't be back for some time, which suited her because she didn't want to consult him about what she had made up her mind to do. She went to see her mother-in-law and gave her the letter.

'It's from Prem. Read it.'

Mrs Gogte read the letter slowly, then said, 'The poor child. She must come here. Who knows whether they are looking after her properly there?'

She despatched Mahesh to bring Mohini who came and went to stay at her mother's house. The mother had been offered a face-saving device and seemed to have accepted it gladly.

When Ann went to see her, Mohini seemed in good health and quite good spirits.

She said, 'I think it was a good thing for me to get out of there. With nothing to take my mind off what had happened, I was feeling more and more sorry for myself and difficult to live with. Prem was urging me to come to Sangampur but I didn't

want to leave him. There was also the problem of where I would live.'

'You could have come to me.'

'I couldn't park on you indefinitely.'

'It wouldn't have mattered, Mohini, but this is really best for you, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'Is Prem included in this reunion?'

'Of course. I wouldn't have it any other way. I can't thank you enough, Ann.'

'For what?'

'For all you have done for me. Even the fact that I am here now. If it hadn't been for you, Aai would never have sent for me.' She giggled. 'Aai was so surprised when you just marched up and handed her the letter. She said, "That's one thing about our Ann, when she makes up her mind to do something, she just goes ahead and does it. Nothing can stop her".'

'Do I take that as a compliment?'

'Coming from my mother, definitely.'

Ann smiled. 'So you are happy to have made up the silly quarrel.'

'Yes. Although I wish it hadn't happened quite this way.' Her eyes suddenly filled with tears. 'It's mostly the waste of it, you know. You carry this child for nine months, you live with the idea of it, and suddenly it's not there any longer, and all your effort and hope was for nothing.' She smiled through her tears. 'Funny thing is, everybody is blaming themselves. Prem blames himself because he put his weight on the side of my staying there. And Aai blames herself because she thinks that if she had invited me here for my delivery the baby might be alive now. But I probably would not have come anyway. In any case when I described all that had happened, Dr Wad said that it was probably a combination of factors and it could have happened anywhere.'

'That's good to hear. It is so much better not to think that it was avoidable.'

'Isn't it? You know, if I had to lose the baby, it was better there among strangers than here. It would have been awful to be in a maternity hospital surrounded by all the newborn babies. And I would have hated coming home empty-handed with everyone coming to see me and pity me. And saying behind my back

that it must have been this or that which I had done or hadn't done which had led to the tragedy. That's the way people are.' Her eyes became moist again as she added, 'It was a girl, Ann. My Tejaswini.'

'Don't cry, Mohini. You will have other babies. You will have your Tejaswini. Goodness, I can hardly pronounce the name.'

Mohini laughed at that. 'You can call her Teju for short.'

26

Ann was beginning to see why social work was not looked upon with a great deal of favour. She still enjoyed teaching the small children, and learned a lot from the teaching. But she was getting to know more about the centre and its working and the jockeying for power and status, the bootlicking of politicians, the chiselling, that went on. She tried to tell herself that this sort of thing went on everywhere, and there was no reason why institutions that did social work should be exceptions. But some of the things still stuck in her throat. There was one woman, the wife of an industrialist, who was connected with the SWC, who simply called up when her servant was on leave or she needed extra household help, and the centre sent her someone from their home for abandoned women. There was no question of payment, either to the centre, because she certainly did enough for them, and this was only a small thing that they could do for her in return, or to the women—they were helpless and homeless and were being supported by the centre anyway, so why should they be paid?

There was another woman who worked on a more regular basis, who found endless excuses to go to Bombay at the expense of the centre, because her husband lived in Bombay. Ann felt that since this was a charitable organization, she should have paid her own way and done the work without

charging them.

In a way Ann liked what she was doing best, because she felt that dealing with children was more straightforward than dealing with adults. And since this was charitable work, nobody breathed down her neck about what to teach or how to teach. She had now also become part of a small group which was trying out various experiments in non-formal education. The group was sponsored by the State Institute for Education, and the three others in the group, two women and a man, were doing a study project.

She was one day talking to Mrs Velankar about certain ideas she was trying out when Mrs Velankar said, 'You know Ann, you are so interested in teaching, maybe you would like to work with the students from the Institute of Education. Their idea is to pick children who do not go to school, who cannot be absorbed in the present schooling system, and try to find ways of educating them without having the facilities of a classroom or a great deal of equipment.'

'I would love to work on a project like that. What do I do to get in on it?'

'I'll talk to the Institute's director.'

As Ann had expected, there had been a lot of bureaucratic resistance to the idea, because nobody was sure what Ann's status would be. Finally Ann had said, 'But why do I need any official status?'

'You do if you want to work regularly with these people, be present at their discussions with their professor and their meetings.'

'I could just help them in the field and not be in any way officially connected with the study.'

Mrs Velankar laughed. 'You are underestimating the Indian bureaucratic mind. But anyway, don't you think you will get more out of it if you were a part of all the discussions and so on? I have an idea. Why don't you enroll as a student, like the others working on the project? Your not being a citizen shouldn't stand in the way of your being a student.'

But the director said that he didn't have room for another student in the project, and no budget for paying a stipend. He wouldn't hear of letting Ann become a student without a stipend. Finally a solution was worked out after Ann herself went to see him. It was decided that she would be appointed, on a small

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payment, of course, a field assistant for the project. It amused Ann that an institute which was exploring the possibilities of non-formal education should be so bogged down in rules and regulations.

The people she worked with, however, were more openminded, more imaginative, and she found immediate rapport with them.

They had picked three zopadpattis at various locations, where they held small classes. The idea was to teach the children the basics and at the same time give them a greater awareness of their environment, teach them some simple skills, encourage discussion among them of various topics which should be of interest to them. Regularity of attendance was noted and differences in motivation to attend studied with particular reference to family background. Each child's life history was recorded piecemeal as it was obtained through conversations, without actually going through a long questioning session.

Ravi asked her, 'Don't you find it depressing, going into a zopadpatti day after day, seeing all that poverty at such close quarters?'

'Not really. I mean, most of the people are not really as poor as you would think. They live in very flimsy housing and they have very few possessions. But most of them have jobs or do some casual work that earns them a reasonable livelihood. The thing that baffles me is why they have such an uncaring attitude about their surroundings, as though they had given up hope of anything better. If they could just get together and give only a little of their spare time every day, they could make a lot of improvements. Make roads and dig proper drains, dig a pit to throw all their garbage in, dig a sort of trench to serve as a toilet instead of shitting all over the place and dirtying their own environment. Everybody shouts that the municipality should do all this. Well, maybe they should, but are you going to wait forever for them to get around to doing it?'

Ravi started laughing. 'Ann, my poor idealistic girl, of course they are going to wait forever. Americans base everything on the assumption that everyone always wants to better his lot. But it is simply not applicable to Indians.'

'Why not?'

Ravi shrugged. 'It just isn't. They like to live in filth.'

'How can you say that?'

'Or maybe their definition of filth is different from yours. Or

they have a philosophical reason for being content with what they are and what they have. You yourself say that many of the ills of the American society are derived from their propensity to run after more and better and never being contented.'

'That's true enough, but it doesn't mean you should accept even sub-human conditions and not fight against them at all.'

'They probably don't think of these conditions as sub-human.'

'I don't know if that's true. In any case the children seem to be untouched by their surroundings. They may be filthy, but they are bright and lively, eager to learn and they respond to us with spontaneity because they don't have the hangups that adults do. In fact sometimes their spontaneity borders on total lack of discipline. But I feel that all this energy and enthusiasm can be channelled into something useful, something creative.'

Shri told her that she had an ambivalent attitude towards her work because she had not decided what its purpose was.

'Either you have to have the zeal of a missionary and believe that you want to teach these people a way to a better life, the better life being the kind of life you want them to lead. In this case you impose all your values on them and reject their values. Or you work from a sociologist's point of view, in which case you are only interested in studying them as they are, which also means preserving them as they are. You are experimenting, but to what end?'

'No pre-determined end, Shri, except to make some kind of education available to them, education in the broad sense of the word, increase their awareness.'

'Awareness of what? How poor and deprived they are compared to the rest of the world?'

'No. They have that already, without anybody having to create it,' Ann said calmly

Shri had suddenly turned up one day and Ann said, 'Shri, it's been so long since we have seen you. Where have you been hiding yourself?'

'I could say the same about you,' he said.

'But it's—' she stopped suddenly.

'Exactly. But it's always I who come to see you. The mountain can't go to see Mohammad.'

'You sound triumphant, but do you remember I once asked you to show me where you lived and you said you lived in a poky room in a wada and you couldn't imagine me visiting it?'

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'Of course. Just as I can't imagine you visiting my father's house. Except for the one time when I forced you to.'

'First of all, you didn't force me to, I came to your house willingly and enjoyed the visit.'

'So much so that the second time when you were in the vicinity it didn't enter your mind to repeat the visit.'

'Why are you bringing it up now?'

'Because my home is where I am now going to be, therefore I can never hope to see you.'

'What do you mean?'

'I am going back to live in Pawarwadi.'

'You mean for good?'

'Yes.'

'Shri, what's all this about? Are you giving up your job? What are you going to do in Pawarwadi?'

He smiled. 'I am giving up this job and accepting another. Well, you know I have always talked about going back and doing some developmental work, letting the people there benefit from my education, my ideas. My parents of course thought it was a foolish idea and I felt that I owed it to them to earn enough to help out with the education of my brothers. And I knew there would not be much money in doing the kind of work I wanted to do.'

'So?'

Lately I had begun to think that maybe I was deceiving myself by all this rationalization, that probably I wanted to continue my comparatively comfortable life here and was using my parents as the justification for it. You know, I felt that I could do something for poor students by starting a free tuition class. I did start a class but ended up charging fees because I needed the extra money. The only thing I did to salve my conscience was to take a few poor students for free. Four, to be exact. It just wasn't enough. So finally I decided to simply leave this job and go back and not worry about the consequences. I was screwing up courage to tell my parents. And then suddenly this wonderful opportunity presented itself. I had seen an advertisement put in by a trust formed for rural development, and applied. They called me for an interview and the man who interviewed me said that I was just the sort of person they were looking for, someone who is educated but who has his roots in a village and in agriculture. They feel that someone like me

rather than an outsider and an urbanite would get a better response from villagers. They would feel that I was one of them. Also I would be more likely than an outsider to have a better understanding of their needs and problems.'

'So have you accepted?'

'Yes. This is the sort of chance I have never even dared to dream about. To try out all my ideas of rural development and be able to make a living out of it. I've got to just jump at it. I didn't even ask for time to think.'

He said all the right words, but they did not express what they were meant to express. They sounded hollow, and he did not, while uttering them, exude the happiness that he should have. It was on the tip of Ann's tongue to ask him what he would feel leaving Sangampur and going back to Pawarwadi for good, but she held her silence. It was obvious that he was unhappy, perhaps at the thought of losing contact with the life of a big city and all that it has to offer, perhaps because it had become clear to him, now that he had taken a decision to go back, that he did not relish the idea of getting trapped again in the extremely circumscribed life of a village. Yet he would not face this truth and turn down the job because he was an idealist and he had for a long time told himself that this was what he wanted to do. If he turned it down he would not be able to live with his conscience.

Shri interrupted her thoughts by saying, 'You haven't commented on my statement that I can never hope to see you again.'

'What do you want me to say? It's up to you, isn't it?'

'Why should it be up to me?'

'Because of the two of us you will remain the more mobile.'

'You were mobile enough to go and visit Pathak.'

'Why do you keep harping on that? He had specially invited me to go with Ravi and spend the day at his house.'

'And since his house is big and well-furnished and comfortable, of course you accepted his invitation.'

'Listen, Shri, I don't know why you are baiting me. You just take it for granted that I won't come to visit you. You won't even bother to invite me because you are so sure I won't accept the invitation. It doesn't bother me that you are poor and you live in a small simple house, but it bothers you, and you try to take it out on me.'

Shri looked surprised at the attack, and abashed. He said, 'I

am sorry.'

'You are not sorry at all. It's just a phrase you find it convenient to say now and again. Basically you love throwing up your poverty at me and making me feel guilty and callous and mean. But I refuse to feel guilty or responsible.'

Her anger had not abated.

'Don't let's fight, Ann. Why are we fighting?'

'Why are you fighting, you mean. That's what I'd like to know.'

'All right, I am sorry. I really am. Please forgive me for being such a boor.'

He sounded contrite though she wondered whether she detected sarcasm in his last remark. But she let it go.

When Ravi came home and learned about it he asked, 'They are going to post you in your own village?'

'At least to begin with. Even later for a while at least I will continue using Pawarwadi as headquarters. That's the whole idea, that people are likely to accept new ideas from someone they know rather than from a complete outsider.'

'What are you planning to do?'

'Introduce new methods of farming, to begin with. Levelling of lands, better use of irrigation water, use of soil analysis to determine what fertilizers to use, things of that kind. Then they want to build community toilets and a gasplant which runs on the waste. I don't really know what all their programme includes. There's still to be a briefing session.'

'When are you joining?'

'Very soon. At the end of the college term.'

Later after he had gone Ann said to Ravi, 'Did you get the impression that he was a bit unhappy about leaving here?'

'Unhappy? No. On the contrary I thought he sounded very enthusiastic. This is the sort of thing he has always dreamed of doing, you know.'

'I know. Well, I certainly hope he will be happy with the new job. I think it's a good idea for him to do this, because he was always a misfit here.'

'Oh he'll be a misfit there too. People like him are always misfits.'

'What about people like you?'

'Me? I am not a misfit, am I?'

'No, of course not.'

Ann felt sorry that Shri was leaving. Though she was sometimes exasperated by his humourless intensity, they had spent many companionable hours together, and she had become quite fond of him.

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International travel had increased tremendously in recent years, the cost of a trip across the world was not prohibitively high when calculated in dollars, India was full of American tourists, and there was nothing more natural than that Mrs Palmer should visit her daughter. In fact Ann had written inviting her to come out to visit them sometime, to see Rahul. Still, when considered as an event in the near future, her mother's visit caused a few misgivings.

One of her first reactions was, 'I hope it's a short visit.' The images which insinuated themselves into her mind were of her mother becoming a fixture in her house, taking over the house-keeping, running her life. Then she told herself not to be silly. Even if she is still the same, even if she would like nothing better than to take over and run my life, I mustn't have the same old childish reaction of panic.

Ravi said, practically, 'I suppose we should meet her in Bombay. We'll plan it when we have her schedule.'

Ann knew by the relief she felt that she had been afraid of his reaction, afraid that he might make some offensive remark, indicate that his mother-in-law was not welcome.

A few days later Ravi received a letter from Anoop Singh.

'You remember Anoop? He wants to see me. He says if I go to Bombay in the near future, to let him know. Otherwise he will come here. Wonder what he wants.'

Ravi wrote that he and Ann would be in Bombay to receive Ann's mother and Anoop wrote back inviting them to stay.

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'You can come a day early, so we can have a chance to talk,' he wrote. 'And perhaps your wife would like to see something of Bombay.'

Ann said, 'That's very nice of him. But we hardly know them. Do you think we ought to accept their hospitality?'

'Why not? He wants to see me in any case.'

The Singhs had a large beautiful fourth-floor flat on Warden Road, with a balcony which looked out at an expanse of the Arabian sea. The waves were high, breaking into white foam on the beach.

Sheila Singh said, 'Some days during the monsoon one can feel the salt spray all the way up here.'

'How lovely,' Ann said.

'Not so lovely for the furniture and fabrics and ironwork,' Sheila said wryly.

They were sipping cold beer on the balcony.

Ann said, 'It's a nice beach. Can you bathe here?'

Anoop said, 'You wouldn't want to bathe if you saw the beach in the morning. People shit on the sand, and they throw all sorts of garbage in the water which only gets brought back in with the tide and deposited on the beach.'

'You can't even walk on the beach, much less go in the water,' Mrs Singh said.

'Doesn't anyone sail or have power boats?'

Ravi laughed. 'Ann can't bear to see so much water going to waste.'

Anoop said, 'A lot of sailboats and trawlers ply these waters. But all professionals—fishermen and smugglers. Not many people do it for pleasure.'

'You have to be very rich to afford boats,' Ravi said, 'and the rich in India don't spend money on such things. They only spend on cars, clothes, gold, travel, weddings. They are basically lazy and unimaginative.'

Ann said, 'There must be some other explanation. Maybe some historical tradition.'

'Which makes people lazy and unimaginative.'

'Maybe everyone has a limited imagination and gets stuck in a rut. Or if someone does have unlimited imagination, he soon finds that there are only a limited number of things to do with the time and resources available to him, and he gets bored. So maybe the Indians are a wise people in not rushing to fill their

leisure with hectic activity.'

'Oh for God's sake, Ann, don't spout the same platitudes that we have been selling to the West for hundreds of years.'

Ann said, smiling, 'Sometimes platitudes contain a grain of truth.'

After lunch Anoop told Ravi his business. A friend of his claimed to have isolated and synthetically produced a new plant growth regulator which would increase the growth and weight of the stalks and earheads of cereal crops phenomenally, and would be especially suitable for use on jowar. He had developed the product while working for Straub, a multinational Swiss company, and had now perfected the process for producing the chemical. He was looking into the possibility of producing and marketing it privately. Anoop wanted to know if Ravi would be interested in the venture.

Ravi said, 'Isn't it illegal? Couldn't the company sue him for breach of contract?'

'No, that is where you come in '

'Tell me more ' Ravi's voice was guarded but Ann could feel the excitement building up in him.

'To begin with, Behl—my friend—won't come into it, not openly. Another thing, even if someone traces it to him, you will not be using the same process that Straub will be using. They can't object to your using a different process. And you will be marketing the product under a different brand name.'

'What about trials? If we are using a different process we can't go by Straub's trials. There may be elements in our final product which are toxic to plants.'

'Apparently he can make a small quantity of the material available for trials. I don't know too much about it, but if you are interested, I'll call him over and you can talk to him.'

'What are the financial arrangements? Are you in this?'

'Of course. Behl will give us the process. We'll get a bank loan to put up a small plant to manufacture the substance. We'll work out the details later, but broadly speaking, you will be responsible for production and I'll look after sales. Behl will be a sleeping partner, at least to begin with. Of course we will draw up a proper legal agreement and so on.'

'I'll have to think about it, Anoop.'

'Naturally. I didn't expect you to take a decision rightaway. You can take your time. Meet and talk to Behl, then see what

you want to do.'

Later they did some sightseeing, a bit of shopping and a lot of window-shopping. That night they ate at a newly opened restaurant which, Sheila said she had heard, served exquisite Moglai food.

Ann was aghast at the prices on the menu, and inevitably thought of Shri. Yet she also felt the seduction of the decor of the place, the live music, the exotic aroma of the food, the glittering people.

Sheila said, 'This is a nice place, isn't it? I've been wanting to try it.'

'Nice place,' Ann said. 'And great food.'

'So how do you like Bombay? This is your first visit, isn't it?'

'Frankly, I find it a little overwhelming.'

'I love it. In spite of all the crowds and filth and the horrible slums, there's something about this place that grabs you. Somehow you can ignore all the bad things.'

Ravi said, 'I don't think I can ever learn to ignore them. That's one of the things this country does to you, it keeps you feeling guilty, so you can't even enjoy yourself with a clean conscience.'

Anoop said, 'Everyone feels like that after returning from abroad. You'll get over it.'

'I don't think so. How can you get over it? Every time you come to a place like this, you drive in a car, or buy something expensive, you see a ragged urchin holding his hand out for charity, or some poor guy sleeping on the pavement because he hasn't got a roof over his head.'

'The disparities you talk about exist everywhere, you know.'

'They are not as apparent.'

'That doesn't mean they don't exist. It only means that in some places it is easier to muzzle your conscience.'

Ann said, 'You are right, Anoop. When you enjoy the good things of life in America, you don't see the poor guy sleeping on the pavement in Bombay, but he's still there. And if you feel responsible or guilty, you would and should feel it wherever you are. Why else do you think Americans skip a meal and give money to the famine victims in Ethiopia?'

Sheila said, 'You don't have to go so far afield. Do you suppose that all the people you pass on your way to the Club 21 in New York can afford to go there?'

'Leave them aside. How about the real poor in America? Do you think there aren't any? Are you going to feel bad only about the people you actually see?'

Ravi said, 'Okay, I admit I am a hypocrite.'

'Not a hypocrite,' Sheila said, 'Naive, maybe.'

'Whatever. Still, after all is said and done, you must admit that what you actually experience has a greater impact than what you perceive on a theoretical level.'

Ann said, 'So we come right back to where we started. To save yourself from guilt, all you need to do is put a distance between yourself and whatever makes you feel guilty.'

For dessert they had a *halwa* covered with real silver foil which Ann thought was the height of elegance. They didn't linger over the coffee as Ravi and Ann wanted to make an early night of it.

Ann said to Ravi, 'They've been so nice, they've really gone out of their way to make it a pleasant visit for us.'

Ravi smiled.

'What's that smile supposed to mean?'

'Just when I was wondering about ulterior motives, you seem to have come round to thinking that they were nice out of the goodness of their hearts.'

'What do you mean? What ulterior motives?'

'I felt they were a little too nice for casual acquaintances, which is after all what we are. Even inviting us to stay was a bit of a surprise. Indians are often like that, they invite someone they have just met to stay with them, but Sheila and Anoop are not that kind of people.'

'Yet when I was reluctant to accept their invitation, you overruled me.'

'Because the alternative would have been spending a fortune on a hotel room, or staying with Bharatikaku who is a bore. Besides, by itself the invitation didn't seem that unusual. But combining it with everything else makes me wonder. They have given up their whole day for us, entertained us lavishly insisted on buying that expensive elephant for Rahul, ever made arrangements to have their maid stay with Rahul so we could go to eat without having to bother to take him. It's all just too much.'

'What are you trying to say?'

'The only thing I can think of is this project of his. He mu

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want me very badly.'

'Why does that make you suspicious?'

'Not really suspicious. I mean, I don't think he is out to swindle me or anything. But rolling out the red carpet seems a bit out of proportion.'

'Well, you don't have to make up your mind until you have seen Behl, anyway. That will give you a better idea what it's all about.'

'I'll talk to Appa, too. See what he thinks. He has more experience of this sort of thing.'

Ann was surprised to find that she lived very much in the immediate present. It was only the next morning as they sped towards the airport that she began to grasp the fact of her mother's visit.

Her heart raced and tears pricked at the back of her eyes when she saw her mother walking out of the customs hall, and spilled over as they embraced.

'Mom, you look just the same. There's no change in you at all.'

'It's only been a couple of years, Ann,' Mrs Palmer said half laughing and half crying. Then she started crying in earnest, saying, 'Your poor father. How he would have loved to see you and his grandson. Raoul, is that how you say his name? Just look at him. Isn't he a doll?'

Ann didn't know what she had expected but she couldn't get over a sense of shock that there was indeed so little change in her mother. Somewhere she had thought that the death of a husband would leave some sort of almost permanent imprint on you. She told herself not to be silly, yet she kept glancing at her mother, noting her carefully styled hair, her rouged cheeks and mouth. She thought, my God, did I expect her to have given up worldly life and become a nun or something?

Ravi shook hands with his mother-in-law and said, 'How are you, Mom? You are looking well.'

He had never called her that. He had started out calling her Mrs Palmer and stuck to it.

Mrs Palmer beamed and said, 'You're not looking so bad yourself.'

Ann felt a wave of relief and realized that she had been tensely waiting for their meeting, dreading a confrontation.

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Practically the first words Mrs Palmer said to Ann upon arriving at her house were, 'Good heavens, Ann, how am I going to manage this toilet?'

Ann burst out laughing. She said, 'You squat across it. But if you can't manage because of your joints, we'll get you a commode seat that fits on top of it.'

'Well, I'll try it. There's no toilet paper here, though.'

'I am sorry Mom. This is one thing I had neglected to think of. I'll get some toilet paper for you right away.'

'What do you do?'

'I wash myself, like everyone else.'

'You mean you actually touch—'

'Yes, I do.'

'Did you know about this before you came?'

No, but I learned. And now I wouldn't dream of using the other kind of toilet if this kind is available. It seems so much better. And cleaner too, if you think about it.'

Mrs Palmer shook her head. 'Well, it may be everything that's desirable, but I'll stick to what I am used to.'

The next day Ravi fetched a seat that had been made for his father when he had sprained his knee and couldn't squat, and they installed it in the toilet.

Mrs Palmer seemed quite content to stay at home with Ann shopping with her, and play with Rahul. Once at Ann's house, she went to the zopadpatti in which Ann's non-formal school was conducted.

When she was talking for the underdogs, aren't you?' she asked. 'Among the blacks and Mexicans there it's the hutment school. What do you want to spend your life doing?'

Although I don't think there's anything

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'The only thing wrong with it is that it's frustrating work. It doesn't accomplish anything, it's like a drop in the ocean.'

'I don't mind my work being a drop in the ocean. That's all it amounts to, no matter what you do, don't you think?'

'Maybe, Ann, but then what's the particular point in working in this place?'

Ann shrugged. 'It's as good a place as any.'

'I mean in this country.'

'Because this is where I happen to be.'

Ann kept asking her mother whether she wanted to see this or that.

'Mom, do you want to see the caves at Ajanta and Ellora? They are not very far from here.'

'No, Ann, I am perfectly happy just being here with you folks.'

Ravi said, 'We'll all drive there. We haven't seen the caves, either.'

'Frankly, Ravi, I am not really interested in sightseeing. I don't know much about India, and the sights wouldn't mean anything.'

'Come on, Mom,' Ann said, 'say yes, I am just dying to see the caves and Ravi's never offered to take me.'

'Haven't you, Ravi?'

'You know how it is. When you are living somewhere, you always tell yourself there's plenty of time to see everything.'

'Mom, please.'

'Oh, all right.'

Ann armed herself with a book and insisted on hiring a guide who could point out to her all the paintings described in it. She didn't want to miss a single cave and finally even Ravi's patience wore thin.

The next day when they were to go to Ellora, Mrs Palmer announced that she was still feeling tired because of the exertion of the day before and would prefer to stay in the hotel.

'Are you serious, Mom?'

'Completely.'

'You have come all this way and would forgo seeing one of the most spectacular temples?'

'One day of spectacular sights is enough for me.'

Ann promised that she would try to hurry through the sight-seeing, but could not budge Mrs Palmer. Finally they went without her.

Ann was ecstatic, especially over the Kailasa temple, and couldn't see enough of the detail. Finally Ravi told her that if she wanted to be so thorough, she would either have to spend a couple of weeks there, or come again.

'Yes, of course. I must come again. Thank you, darling, for thinking of this trip. This has been the most exciting two days I have ever spent. We must do lots more sightseeing.'

'Not while your mother is here,' he said, smiling.

'Obviously not.'

A few days later Ann asked Mrs Palmer whether she would like to see where Ann worked, meet the people she worked with.

'I don't think so, Ann.'

'I just thought you would get bored being by yourself so much of the time, and would like to meet some people other than Ravi and me.'

'Thank you, Ann, but I'm not really interested in meeting anybody. After all, I'll be here such a short time. What difference does it make whether I meet anybody or not?'

'Mom, why are you determined to close your mind to this country? You don't show even as much curiosity as a tourist.'

'I haven't come here as a tourist. This is not a country I would have chosen to come to as a tourist. Look, I'll be frank with you. I came all this way only to persuade you and Ravi to come back to the U.S.'

'You can't mean that! You really came here to persuade us to ~~simply throw over our life here and go back?~~'

'Why not? What I've seen of your life here, it's nothing so great.'

'How can you say that? We have a good life here.'

'You can have a better life there.'

'Better in what way? Another car, a bigger house, appliances?'

'Yes, that—don't sneer at it—and better schools, toys, books, a cleaner environment for your son. Don't these matter?'

'I wouldn't bet on the cleaner environment and better schools, and the other things really don't matter. That's one of the things I've learned in this country. It's amazing all the things you can do without, which you used to think of as absolutely necessary for life. In fact, life can be so much simpler without these possessions. So many of them add nothing to the quality of life and doing without them doesn't even seem like

deprivation. You realize that there's something wrong, sick, in such complete dependence on things. And losing that dependence is a kind of freedom, you know.'

'You are protesting too much, Ann. I don't think there's any particular virtue in doing without things when you can have them.'

One day the newspaper carried an item about Air Force Day celebrations.

Mrs Palmer remarked, 'It's funny thinking about a country like India having an armed force.'

What do you mean a country like India?'

'Well, a poor, backward, underdeveloped country which can spend its resources more profitably elsewhere.'

'You can say the same about the U.S. Do you mean to say that the colossal amounts they spend on arms and armed forces is just spare cash left over after meeting all the basic needs of all the people?'

'Not quite, but—'

'No buts about it, you can't apply different rules to different countries. A poor underdeveloped country has enemies as surely as a rich developed country, and has as much right to protect itself against them. As much as any rational human being. I deplore the necessity of it all, but since all the countries in the world are not about to throw away their weapons and live in peace you can't see that India being prepared to defend itself.'

'My, Ann, you're more patriotic than the most fanatical Indians.'

'No, it's just that I can see the other side of the coin. Living in America, it's difficult to imagine that a whole world exists outside. A world which is often at strife with you but has as much right to live by its own rules as you do by yours.'

'When have Americans ever denied them that right?'

'They don't in theory but they do in practice, when the other country doesn't conform to their political ideology.'

'Have you turned communist?' Mrs Palmer asked suspiciously.

Ann laughed. 'Mom, you have just demonstrated what I have been talking about. I haven't turned communist, but I know that you can't just dismiss out of hand a philosophy to which half the world subscribes. You've got to come to terms with it.'

'How can you come to terms with something you know in

your bones is wrong?’

‘They feel in their bones that your way is wrong. How are you going to resolve the impasse? By building up arms?’

‘Yes, to see that they don’t overrun the world.’

‘And they go on doing the same thing. So how does it solve anything?’

‘Have you got a better solution?’

‘Yes, learning to live together.’

‘You are very naive if you think that’s possible.’

‘That’s one thing this country can teach the world.’

‘Your advocacy of India is really touching. I hope people here appreciate such devotion from a foreigner.’

‘I’ve applied for citizenship, Mom,’ Ann said, smiling. ‘So I hope I don’t remain a foreigner for long.’

‘No!’ Suddenly Mrs Palmer was crying. Ann was dismayed. She went and put her arms around her mother. ‘Mom please, don’t cry. What’s the matter?’

‘It means you’ve made up your mind that you’re never coming back. Then what am I wasting my time here for?’

‘Mom, don’t say that. Doesn’t it mean anything to you to come out and see us? And my becoming a citizen of this country won’t stop me from coming to see you.’

Mrs Palmer blew her nose and sat quietly staring out. Then she said, ‘Why have you turned against the country of your birth, the country that’s given you everything you have?’

‘I’ve not turned against it. What makes you think I have?’

‘Isn’t your applying for Indian citizenship proof of it?’

‘Not necessarily. It’s only the most convenient thing to do when you are going to live in a country on a long-term basis.’

‘When you are the wife of an Indian citizen, they don’t insist that you become a citizen, do they? They let you stay as long as you want.’

‘It’s still on sufferance. You have to report to the police periodically, and renew your visa and so on. It just becomes irksome.’

‘Ravi said nothing about your having applied for citizenship.’

‘There was no occasion to mention it, I guess.’

‘There was. We were talking about the possibility of you going back to the States, and he said he would be willing to think about it.’

When Ann tackled Ravi about it, he said, ‘I didn’t just say i

right out like that. She was asking me about my job, whether I was happy with it. I told her no, that I was considering giving it up and going into a small manufacturing venture. Then she commented that maybe I would have better prospects in the States and asked me whether I would be receptive to the idea of going back. I said I would have no objection, provided I had a decent job. I don't care that much where I live.'

'You mean you would really seriously think about going back?'

'I would if things didn't work out here, if I had an attractive job offer there.' He laughed. 'A lot of ifs.'

'You don't think you should take me into confidence about these things?'

'I told you there's not much likelihood that anyone will offer me a job. I'm so out of touch with my field.'

'Still, you could have said something. I feel such a fool having applied for citizenship when we might go back.'

'Oh that. You don't know what Indian officialdom is. You may hear nothing from them for years. They probably won't do anything about it unless you keep after them. So you need not worry.'

The thought kept nagging at Ann that he was not being quite honest with her. It also bothered her that he took the whole thing so casually. How could he say he didn't care where he lived so long as he had a satisfactory job? Personally she did not think that it was an admirable quality to be able to live a superficial kind of life anywhere in the world so that you are not touched by the deeper currents. It was easy enough to live somewhere as a perpetual outsider, free to follow your own chosen way of life, acknowledging no obligations to the society or the country in which you lived, refusing to be judged by their code of conduct, refusing to commit yourself to their values, not because you didn't believe in them or wanted to fight against them, but simply because you chose always to live on the fringe.

During what would have been the last few days of Mrs Palmer's stay, Ann fell off her bicycle and twisted her right leg, damaging the tendons of the knee. Luckily there were no broken bones, but it was very soon clear that it was going to be a long time before she could move about normally.

Despite Ann's protests that it was not necessary, Mrs Palmer

postponed her departure by a month, and Ann was happy that she stayed on. She helped with the housekeeping and cooking and looking after Rahul, but her real gift was her company without which Ann felt she would have died of loneliness. Sometimes, while being sponged and dressed by her mother, or playing scrabble with her, or being coaxed to eat some favourite dish which she had gone to a lot of trouble to cook, Ann had the eerie feeling of being back in her childhood, and waited for her mother to establish the right of ownership on the strength of the love and care she lavished on her.

She only said one day, 'You know Ann, through the years of your growing up, I dreamed that you would marry and live somewhere within reach and we could continue being close to each other. Was it such an extravagant dream?'

'Of course not, Mom. I didn't intentionally reject the possibility. Things just didn't work out that way, that's all.'

'No, Ann,' Mrs Palmer said calmly. 'You can't say that. You did have a choice, and you opted for coming to India. Even at that time if you had put your weight on the side of settling there, Ravi would have been willing to do so.'

'Maybe you are right. I don't know. At the time I believed that Ravi wanted to come back here. And I was glad of it. For a long time I had been restless. I wanted to go somewhere, see how some of the rest of the world lived, what made them tick. While living in America, it is very easy to become lulled into believing that nothing of any importance exists outside it. I didn't want to be lulled. I knew that there was a whole world outside my country and I wanted to see it. You know I had been attracted to India since I was in high school. My meeting and marrying Ravi was an accident, but even without it I would probably have come out here anyway.'

'And you don't want to consider coming back now?'

'Not just yet in any case.'

'Because even now, the choice rests with you, you know.'

Ann didn't say anything.

'You have the choice between the best place there is in the world, a place which almost anybody would sell his soul to go to, and this country which is full of dirt and squalor and shit and where nothing works and you choose to live here! I just fail to understand you.'

Ann desisted from reminding her mother that 'I can't under-

stand you' had always been a refrain of their life together.

Ravi was going to Bombay to see his mother-in-law off, even though she didn't really seem to expect it. Ann was happy that they had begun to get on so well together, and seemed to have quite forgotten their earlier animosity. She was not perambulatory enough to accompany them. When they said good-bye, Mrs Palmer's eyes were moist. It was now Ann's turn to burst into tears and, consoling her, Mrs Palmer said, 'Maybe Ann, in a few more years you will look at things more sensibly and realistically, and you will want to come back. Just remember that you will always have a home with me.'

Ann realized, as she smiled and waved, that this parting was, in a way, more final than the other, because it established the fact that she and her mother did not live in the same world, and their physical separation had little to do with it.

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Ann limped to the door and opened it, wondering who it could be so early in the afternoon. She was so surprised that it took her a few moments to say, 'Mr Pathak! What a pleasant surprise!'

'I can see that it's a surprise,' he said, smiling, 'I only hope you speak truthfully when you say it's a pleasant one.'

After her last visit to Sandane, Ann had felt sure that she had achieved a rapport with him, and some day soon he would come to see her and Ravi. When he didn't turn up for a long time, she was disappointed and resentful. She vowed that she would never go to see him again. What was the point in cultivating a relationship in which the other person made no effort to meet you halfway?

She said, 'Do come in, won't you?'

Following her in he said, 'What's the matter? Why are you

limping?"

'I had a sort of accident.'

'What sort of accident?'

'I was on my bike and saw this rickshaw suddenly coming at me and swerved to avoid it. The next moment I was lying on the road. I don't know exactly how it happened. I must have lost my balance, or hit a stone or something. I must have lost consciousness briefly, because I don't remember that part at all.'

'Good heavens! It could have been very bad.'

'It was bad enough. I was effectively immobilized for almost a month. I could manage somehow only because my mother was here to help.'

'Is your mother visiting you?'

'Was. She's gone back now. Actually she would have gone much earlier but stayed on because of my accident.'

'That was nice. By the way, I have not barged in at an inconvenient time, have I? If I have, just throw me out.'

'Oh no. On the contrary you are very welcome. You don't know how welcome. I have been pretty well confined to the house, you see, and I get hungry for company. I've got Rahul of course, but after a few hours of him I crave intelligent adult conversation.'

'I wish I had known. I would have come to see you earlier.'

'How could you know, if you don't keep in touch?'

'I stand rebuked. Actually, every time I come to Sangampur, a visit to you is on my list, but something always crops up and it gets postponed.—Now I've made it worse.'

Ann started laughing. 'Giving excuses always gets one in hot water. But it's my fault. I've no right to force you to give excuses. Anyway, what brings you here today?'

'I had come here to attend a wedding. I hate weddings. I think people make an unnecessary amount of fuss about something that ought to be a simple and routine business. But this is an old friend—a cousin really. He insisted that I must come. But I regretted it almost from the minute I arrived. People talk and behave so idiotically. I swear they have a special set of rules of conduct for these occasions. It began to get on my nerves. So after lunch I excused myself saying I had some business to attend to, and here I am. The place is near here, and I thought I would take a chance on finding you home.'

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She brought them some coffee. He said, 'Tell me what you have been doing with yourself. Other than running into auto-rickshaws, I mean.

When she told him about the non-formal school he said, 'It sounds like just the thing that should be tried in rural areas. There the problem of getting children to go through the normal school system is even greater, because a lot of the children are required either to work outside the home to earn a living or to stay at home and look after younger siblings so as to free the mother to work outside. If they could have a teacher come to their basti after working hours, they could have at least some chance of having an education.'

'I wonder how much motivation they would have to expend the time and effort required, especially if they work all day. In our classes we find the response a bit disappointing. Initially it was very enthusiastic, then it tapered off. The children who have never been to school are very reluctant to subject themselves to physical or intellectual discipline. The benefits of education seem chimerical to them. They would much rather spend their time playing. Maybe the fault is ours, for not being able to devise a plan of studies that can hold their interest sufficiently for them to keep coming back.'

'Still, I would like to see an experiment like this tried in a village. When people think of a school, they think of a room where children gather and are taught a fixed curriculum. Nobody thinks that education might mean different things and there might be many ways of imparting it.'

'Maybe you can meet some of the people at the Institute and talk to them.'

'I am hardly qualified to say anything about education. Besides, there's no point in discussing something unless someone from here is willing to come and start a programme and train a local person to run it.'

'I'll ask them if they have any plan to expand their activities outside Sangampur.'

'Will you do that? Then perhaps next time I see you we can talk about it.'

She was amused to see that he seemed relieved to have the responsibility for direct immediate action taken off his hands.

She said, 'But if you want to do anything, you will have to talk to them directly.'

He smiled. 'You're not going to let me off the hook, is that it? But I'm an armchair social worker, you see. I feel, on the theoretical level, that certain things ought to be done or can be done. But that doesn't by a long shot mean that I am actually going to do them.'

As once before, she was amazed by his uncanny ability to read her thoughts.

He continued pensively, 'Last time we met, you asked me about various things I had done for the village. I think you felt that I was protesting too much about my motives not being altruistic. But I was only stating the truth. Basically I don't care that much about people. Other than those in my immediate circle, I mean. Does that shock you? Perhaps it should shock me. Sometimes I worry about it. How can I not care? If I see somebody starving or sick, I try to help them because such conditions ought not to exist. But I don't feel their suffering on an emotional level. So, even though I think that people like you are admirable, I am incapable of emulating you. What I am getting at is, I simply threw out an idea. If anyone is interested in following it up, I will help with space, money, that sort of thing. But you can't count on my active participation in the programme.'

Ann gave a wry smile. 'At least you are honest.'

'You don't approve.'

'I neither approve nor disapprove. Why should I?'

'You are right. Why should you? There is no reason why you should. I was being presumptuous.'

Just then Rahul awoke from his nap and called to her, and she was relieved to be able to leave the room. When she came back he said, 'Do you have any plans for the rest of the afternoon?'

'N-no,' she said a little hesitantly, not sure what he was getting at.

'Would you and Rahul like to go for a ride?'

'Oh I would love to. But are you sure you have the time?'

'All the time in the world.'

'Then let me get some waterproof pants on this character. He still wets.'

Ann was happy to be out of the house and away from the city. She and Ravi rarely went for drives. By the time he got home from work he was never in a mood to go out again. Sometimes

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they went for a short walk on the hill, but since her accident she couldn't walk. Ravi never seemed to understand her need to get out, and she didn't like to complain because it irritated him and then he was in a foul mood all evening.

Pathak drove up the Mahakali ghat. From where he stopped the car, near the top, a narrow rough track led to a small natural cave whose mouth was partially hidden by a wild fig tree. Behind the tree was a spring from which a tiny stream ran down the hillside.

He said, 'This spring is perennial. It flows even in the hottest summer. All the tree cutting and grass burning has apparently not yet affected it.'

On one side of the cave was a steep path by which one could reach the top of the cave. There was a boulder which, if one scrambled up on it, offered a comfortable perch for a bird's eye view of the valley and Sangampur beyond it.

He said, 'Can you manage it?'

'I think so.'

'I'll get up there first, then you can hand Rahul to me.'

Somehow Ann managed to scramble up with his help.

'I hope it didn't hurt your leg.'

'No, not much.'

'Do you often wear saris?'

'Not often. But lately I have been wearing them because they are more comfortable with my leg, and also easier than pants for changing dressings. Do you think I don't look good in saris?'

'No, nothing like that,' he said with surprise.

'I've been told so by many people.'

'Goodness, why would anybody do that?'

'I haven't the figure for it.'

'Nonsense. You should wear whatever you feel comfortable in, not pay any attention to what people say.'

Ann was amused that he avoided commenting on how she looked in a sari, though she liked the fact that he conceded her the freedom to wear whatever she liked. When she had taken to wearing saris during her pregnancy Ravi had protested.

'You seem to wear nothing but saris these days.'

'I like wearing them. They are such beautiful materials, and such gorgeous colours. And just now it's the most convenient way to dress. Otherwise I will have to get maternity clothes made.'

'Oh it's all right for now. But afterwards I hope you will go back to dresses and pants and skirts.'

'I didn't know you felt so strongly about it, Ravi.'

'Well, you are not you when you wear saris. You look like so many Western women who bend over backwards to Indianize themselves.'

'What's wrong with that?'

'Nothing wrong, it's just unnecessary. You should wear what you are used to.' Then he had added, *'What's the use of having such perfect legs if you are going to hide them in saris all the time?'*

'Why, thank you darling, I'll keep it in mind.'

She wondered whether Pathak would react differently if he were her husband. Somehow she didn't think so. He probably wouldn't care what his wife wore. He would probably be the despair of some wife. Ann thought she would feel quite comfortable with a man like him.

But she thought that what Ravi had said also had a point, although Ravi had not made it. It was not necessary to change in any way in order to become an Indian, to be accepted as an Indian. This was a country in which newcomers were welcomed but not expected to refashion themselves into one of the already existing moulds. They could not only keep their own dress, language, religion, culture, they could pass it on to their next generation practically intact. And this, which always caused serious divisions among the population, also constituted the strength of the basic structure, for it had become so varied, so complex, that nobody could impose on it the kind of regimentation necessary for a totalitarian state. And if you accepted this, then it was not just unnecessary for you to change, it was almost a sacred duty not to change, to insist on your right to be different.

She said, *'I think perhaps there is something symbolic in a sari for me. Sometimes I feel that accepting a different sort of life is like shedding a familiar, much used article of clothing and putting on a new one. You have to get used to its smell and the feel of it against your skin and the way it moves and the whisper of the fabric.'*

Mohanish laughed and said, *'Now you are a proper Hindu philosopher. That is exactly how a soul, discarding an old used body, is supposed to enter into a new one, as though it was dis-*

carding an old dress and putting on a new one.'

'Do you believe that?'

'No.'

'It's still a lovely idea, though.'

'So lovely that you want to believe it?'

'Almost. Hindu philosophy seems to be full of such ideas. There's one my Marathi tutor told me which is very dear to me, that we, and all that is happening to us, are only a dream; some cosmic being is dreaming. Some day he will wake up and that's the end of us. Why are you smiling?'

'Because this is the way religion gets to you. With pretty words and pretty fancies which sound so nice that you want to believe in them without examining the truth of them.'

'You can also enjoy them without necessarily believing in them.'

'Perhaps.'

'Maybe it is the pretty place that gives rise to a pretty fancy. It is lovely. I must tell Ravi about it.'

'If he grew up in Sangampur, he must know about it. It's a favourite place for kids to come to on Sundays.'

Had Ravi simply forgotten about such places which must have been part of his growing up here? Or was he unwilling to commit himself to this country even to the extent of taking her to see them?

She said, 'Where do you stay when you are in Sangampur?'

'At my uncle's place.'

'Maybe next time you come you can stay with us. It will be company for Ravi. We would love to have you.'

He said, 'I'd like to do that.' But his voice was noncommittal, without enthusiasm, and she had the feeling, as she had had earlier, that she had moved too fast, that he was not yet ready for this intimacy. He wanted to set the terms of their relationship himself, and just when she felt she was establishing communication with him, he withdrew or changed tack. She felt herself on slippery ground, and smiled to think that just a moment ago she had thought that she could be very comfortable with him.

Mohanish had not handed Rahul back to her after she got up on the rock. Rahul now sat placidly on his knee, looking around, not demanding to go back to his mother.

Mohanish said, 'He's a friendly fellow, isn't he?'

'Yes, he is.'

'It's such a nice feeling, holding a small baby.'

Ravi was always bothered by the possibility of Rahul wetting or throwing up or messing him up in some way. He also minded it when Rahul touched him with grubby hands or tried to climb all over him while dusty and dirty from playing in the garden. Ann could see that Ravi shrank from him at such times. He said, 'Why is he so filthy? Look, call him to you, will you? He is making a mess of my clothes.' She tried to laugh at his fastidiousness and reminded him that he was also a child once and all children are dirty because they are incapable of understanding the concepts of dirty and clean.

Pathak was saying, 'Sometimes, you know, I think life is passing me by. I feel I should hurry up and get married. have a child, otherwise all these things are going to be forever out of my reach.'

'Why don't you then?'

'That's what my mother keeps asking me. She says she is not going to last me my lifetime. Who's going to look after me when she is gone? But that's not the point. I don't need to be looked after. I can be quite self-sufficient. That's what gives me cold feet. I don't want to end up with a wife who would be content with filling the traditional role.'

'Surely there are enough girls in India who have different ideas about marriage.'

'How do you go about finding them? Stuck as I am in Sandane, there's not much chance to meet anyone.'

'So what's the way out?'

'I'll tell you what,' his voice was suddenly playful. 'Don't you have a twin sister or something?'

Ann merely smiled and shook her head.

He said, 'Seriously, though, I think the possibility of my getting married is very slim. By now I am so set in my ways that I will probably be very difficult to live with. And I think I am used to being alone. I am not even sure that I would want to share my daily life to the extent that marriage requires.'

'You will be sure if the right girl comes along.'

When they got up to leave Ann sighed. 'I don't feel like leaving this place.'

'We can always camp here for the night.'

'I can't remember the last time I enjoyed myself so much. Thank you.'

'The pleasure was entirely mine, Ma'am.'

Ravi was home when they got back, and Ann thought that his greeting to Pathak was not as friendly as it might have been. He did invite him in for some tea but Pathak said that he had better put in an appearance at the wedding reception if he didn't want to be excommunicated by his family.

Ravi said, 'Do come again sometime when we can have a chance to talk. And thank you. It was very kind of you to take Ann out. She gets lonely.'

After Pathak was gone Ann said, 'You said that so patronizingly.'

'Said what patronizingly?'

'Don't insult me by taking that innocent tone. You meant that comment as a put-down to both of us, implying that I am a brainless stay-at-home wife who gets bored with her own company and needs to be amused, and he has the leisure to do the amusing while you are busy with important work.'

'It happens to be true, doesn't it?' he said, smiling.

Ann was furious. 'Why are you itching for a fight?'

'As far as I can see, if there's any fighting being done, you are doing it.'

'I don't know what's eating you, Ravi, and I don't intend to find out, unless you are going to come right out with it.'

'All right, I'll spell it out for you, if you are too dense to see the obvious. I come home after a gruelling day at work, and I find you gone. No message, nothing.'

'I thought we would be back before you got home.'

'I wondered where you could have gone, with your bad leg. I thought maybe Rahul had become sick and you had taken him to the doctor. I didn't know what to think, I was so worried. And then you turn up all happy and glowing from your outing and walk in as though nothing had happened. Here I was worried sick and you were out gallivanting with him.'

'Ravi, I am sorry if I caused you anxiety, but really there was no cause for it. You ought to know I am not irresponsible. I wouldn't have just walked out without leaving a message if there had been some emergency.'

'But where was the necessity of going out with him?'

'Ah, so that's really what's eating you.'

'Yes,' he shouted. Then suddenly he lowered his voice. 'Ann, you have been in this country long enough to know that this

sort of thing isn't done here. I mean, if you had some work with him, all right. But just going for a drive with him looks very strange.'

'To whom? Does it look strange to you? Because that's all that matters. Do you object to my going out with another man?'

'Everybody here would think it pretty funny.'

'I was asking you what you think, not what everybody thinks.'

'When you live in a society you have to consider what everybody thinks, not just go ahead and do what you want.'

'If I feel there's nothing wrong with doing it, I see no reason why I should consider what everybody else thinks.'

'You think you can get away with doing things other people can't, because you are a foreigner.'

'I don't consider myself a foreigner, but I still claim the right to behave according to the dictates of my conscience even when that behaviour may not be socially sanctioned.'

'You don't care if I become a laughing stock.'

'I don't see why you should, unless you feel like one. Look Ravi, I don't see why you are making so much out of a trifle. I do get bored because I can't get around by myself, and you have been coming home quite late, and are too tired to be interested in going out afterwards. Is it such a crime for me to go out with another man? I used to go out a lot with Shri.'

'That was different. He was acting as your guide, showing you the city. And it was with my knowledge and consent.'

'Am I supposed to ask your permission every time I do anything? He dropped in, and he himself suggested the drive, and I couldn't see any reason for not accepting it. I still don't.'

'Did you wonder why he dropped in at a time when he had a pretty good idea that I wouldn't be home?'

'Oh this is too much. Your charge is so ridiculous that I refuse to discuss it.' She couldn't help adding, 'I had such a lovely time, I am not going to allow you to spoil everything.'

30

Anoop had brought Behl to meet Ravi. Ravi questioned him at length about the product, the process to be used, how and where the material for testing would be made, the availability of raw materials. He seemed satisfied with the answers. Ann somehow didn't trust Behl.

She said, 'He doesn't want to get his hands caught under anything, does he? He will get his share of the profits without taking any risk at all. He's not giving up his job.'

Ravi said, 'The product is his, Ann. So he has a right to share in the profits. Besides, he is putting in some of the capital.'

'Only his savings. Even the loan won't be in his name.'

'I guess he has his reasons. Anyway, Anoop is a shrewd guy. I don't think he'll let anyone fool him. He won't put money in a business venture unless he is damned sure he is going to get good returns on it. If he thinks Behl is all right, I am willing to go along with him.'

Ravi's father was delighted with the new development. He was willing to put up Ravi's share of the margin money. He only wanted to know if the product would sell.

'The product should be good,' Ravi said, 'since Straub is going to start marketing it shortly. Any risk because of a different process we will eliminate. I think the market is ripe for plant growth regulators. Everyone has accepted until now that fertilizers are the only means of increasing yields. This is an entirely different direction. Of course some such chemicals are already being used, but not on cereal crops and not on a very large scale. But if their efficacy is once proved, the market should be practically unlimited.'

'Then go ahead. I am always in favour of going into the business for oneself. It beats working for someone else any day.'

Ravi seemed very happy and excited. He travelled to Bombay

all the time, to apply for licences, push files, see this or that secretary or minister.

Ann grumbled, 'I thought since Anoop lives in Bombay he would handle all that.'

'His firm has sent him abroad unexpectedly. He couldn't help it.'

'But I thought he was going to give up his job. It's very nice for him to keep his job and have you run all the errands and take all the risks.'

'They won't release him yet. Of course he could still resign, but he doesn't want to displease his boss unnecessarily.'

Ravi had finally given up his job, after they decided that he would be paid a small salary which would later be deducted from his share of the profit.

Ann asked Usha, 'Were you serious when you said I could get a job in Rasika's school?'

'Yes. Any school would jump at someone who can teach English. Why? Do you want a job?'

'I think it's time I began to pull my weight. Ravi is no longer making as much, and I think we would both feel happier if I was earning a regular salary.'

Usha took her to the school and introduced her to the principal. Ann wondered whether her qualifications would be acceptable in this country. The principal told her that a private school like theirs which did not depend on government grants could make their own rules. She also told Ann that she would have to get permission to take a paying job, but it should not pose any problem, especially as she was in the process of being made a citizen.

Ann was in luck because although the school would not give her an appointment till the start of the next school year, she could, if she was interested, start work immediately as a substitute for a teacher who had suddenly gone on an extended sick leave.

Ravi said, 'What got into you suddenly?'

'It's not all that sudden. We had agreed long ago that I should pull my weight and not be a free rider.'

'What happens to your social work? Are you giving it up?'

'Of course not. I may not be able to give it as much time as before, but I'll manage to go there at least twice a week. You know, Ravi, after seeing all those uniformed replicas of each

other, the children in the zopadpatti seem much more real. And of course much more in need of whatever educational help anyone can give them '

'Do you think it's wise to spend so much time away from home?'

'Why not? Rahul is old enough now. And the Bai is there. Besides, since you are away so much, I need something to keep me busy.'

'I am away only because I have to, Ann. Going into business for yourself is not quite like doing a job. You can't just work eight to four and then come home and forget about it. It's a constant responsibility.'

'I know, darling. Only it seems to me that you are carrying the bulk of it.'

'You can't always make an exact division of responsibility in a situation like this. If I say I'll do my part and then the others don't do theirs, the whole project can fall flat. I'd be cutting my own throat.'

'You're right, of course. It's just that I get so lonely.'

He did not respond to this at all, and she felt that his silence conveyed that he didn't really care. She thought, something is happening to us. She didn't know what had changed, but suddenly she felt frightened. She wanted to reach out and touch him, but he had turned away and the moment passed.

The preparations for starting production of the plant growth regulator were nearing completion. They had decided to call it Growell which Ann thought was not a particularly felicitous choice. The preliminary trials had been laid out at Sandane and Ravi was going to inspect the results.

Ann said, 'Why don't you go on Sunday? Then I can come along.'

'I'll only be there a very short time.'

'It doesn't matter. We'll be together for the drive. We have so little time together these days.'

Ravi gave her a look which she couldn't read. Then he said, 'All right, come along if you want to.'

Ann decided to ignore his ungracious tone. She must make an effort to reestablish harmony, and she thought that it would do them both good to be together away from the strain of his work. At first she planned to take Rahul but then she discarded the idea. Ravi, she knew, would feel more relaxed if Rahul was

not along. He was always a little jittery when Rahul was around. He had never learned to take in his stride the presence of a child in their life, *the demands a child can make, the lack of privacy.* He once suggested that she ask Laxmibai to stay nights so she could attend to Rahul during the evening. Ann was scandalized.

She said, 'But he no longer demands much attention, Ravi. He hardly even gets up during the night. And what's the point of having a child if you're going to have him looked after day and night by a servant?'

Ravi said a little sulkily, 'Forget it. I only suggested it because he seems to take up your whole evening. He has to be bathed and fed and read a story to and put to bed. And this is the only time of the day we have together.'

'But darling, I enjoy doing all these things for him. He will only be a baby for such a short time. Once he starts school he will have his own life. So we should enjoy his babyhood while it lasts.'

But obviously Ravi did not enjoy Rahul's babyhood, and Ann had given up trying to arouse some sort of interest in him.

On Sunday she saw that Ravi was pleased when he discovered that they were not taking Rahul. She felt a pang saying good-bye to the boy, because she liked to make a point of spending Sundays with him. She promised him that she would get back as soon as possible.

Pathak greeted them warmly. 'Welcome. Great to see you, Ann. You are just in time for breakfast.'

'So late?'

'I like to take an early round and come back for breakfast.'

Breakfast was freshly-made jowar *bhakri*, garlic chutney and spicy scrambled eggs. It was followed by aromatic percolated coffee. Afterwards they went to look at the trial plots of jowar.

Pathak said, 'There's a clear difference between the sprayed and the unsprayed. You can see for yourself. I've harvested part of each plot and will let you know the fodder and grain yield figures later.'

Ravi said, 'There wasn't much doubt that it would give good results. The only problem might have been some kind of contaminant. Of course we have lab-tested it for purity, but it can never be one hundred per cent pure. So it's safest to field-test it.'

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'They also inspector' some cauliflower and beans sprayed with Growell.

'We'll find out whether the results are statistically significant, but I feel pretty sure that they will be. We are now starting production. By next kharif we want to have a sufficient quantity for at least a thousand acres. Then the rabi season after that we will go really large scale.'

Pathak said, 'I'll spread the word in this area.'

'You already have crops you can use for demonstration. Perhaps you can have a field day and invite farmers. We'll be happy to come and talk to them and pay your expenses. I can also send some display boards and leaflets.'

'Fine. I'll let you know the day. It won't be necessary to pay me so long as you provide all the materials. I'll be glad to canvass for a good product at my own expense.'

'Maybe you can take a dealership for the product.'

'I wouldn't be interested in that, sorry. I wouldn't want to do any direct selling.'

'You sell your own produce.'

'That's different. But selling a product manufactured by someone else is a shopkeeper's job.'

'You look down on shopkeeping?'

'By no means. It's just not my scene, that's all.'

Ravi kept quiet, but Ann could see that he had bristled at this. The silence was a little strained and just to start a conversation Ann said, 'You know, Mr Pathak, one lives so much closer to the rhythm of the seasons when one lives in the country.'

'Quite true. A lot of other things as well. I always get the feeling when I am in a city of drifting away from the primary concerns of life.'

Ravi said, 'Yet you go to the city so often. You are dependent for so many things on the cities. Manufactured goods, books, plays, music.'

'Oh I admit it. If I were deprived of all these, life would be pretty drab.'

'Well, all these things—what you might call culture—come from the cities which you like to malign.'

'I am not maligning cities. I am merely saying that I would feel equally deprived if I had to give up all this and live in a city. If it came to the choice, if I had to choose one or the other, I

would give up the city.'

'That's what you like to think.'

'That's what I know.'

They sat on the veranda and a man-servant brought them tea.

Ann said, 'We haven't seen your mother. Is she away?'

'Yes, she is in Sangampur. She had been having pain in her stomach and it wouldn't respond to any treatment, so she is getting some investigations done.'

Ravi said, 'That's one more thing you are dependent on the cities for, medical treatment.'

Pathak smiled and said mildly, 'You have made your point, Ravi. Don't labour it. Let's just say, I feel I am a very privileged person because I am able to live here and enjoy the fruit of the labour of all those poor saps who have to live in the cities.'

The calmness and confidence with which he conceded the point made Ravi look boorish or at least childish. Ann saw that Ravi was aware of this and it made him furious. She didn't blame him, but she couldn't help admiring Pathak. She felt that this was the way she would like to live, with quiet poise and total certainty that she was doing what was right for her, not caring the slightest bit what anyone else thought. She happened to look at Pathak and very briefly their eyes met. She had an eerie feeling that he knew exactly what she was thinking, and his eyes were probing, trying to establish a much more intimate contact than would seem possible during such a casual meeting of the eyes. She felt a little shaken, then told herself sternly that she was merely being fanciful.

On the way back to Sangampur Ravi said, 'I get so mad at these types who romanticize life in the country and being close to nature and all that rubbish.'

'It's not rubbish at all. A lot of people believe in it.'

'They just like the sound of it. It's only a pose that people like Mohan who have one foot in the city assume. The people who are really stuck in the villages would jump at the first opportunity anybody offers them to go to a city.'

'That's only because they get jobs there, not because they like to live there.'

'How do you know?'

'It stands to reason. They don't live in cities in high-rise apartment buildings which have all the modern conveniences. In fact I know people in America who have it pretty good in

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cities but are leaving their jobs and moving to the country because they are dissatisfied with their lifestyle.'

'Those are the hypocrites who can have the best of both worlds.'

'You think only your own attitudes are genuine. Everyone else's are poses.'

'We are not talking about everyone, we are talking about Mohan. And talking of poses, how about his snooty attitude about selling Growell?'

'What's snooty about telling you that he wouldn't be interested in selling the product?'

'There are ways and ways of telling, Ann. The way he said it, you would think I was asking him to do something low and shady.'

'If you think he is such a hypocrite, why do you take advantage of him? How can you use him and then talk so derogatorily of him?'

'The one has nothing to do with the other.'

'How can it not?'

'One is a personal judgment, the other is a professional arrangement. He is not doing it as a favour to me.'

'Then what is he doing it for?'

'He is also getting something out of it. He is getting the material for free. If it boosts his yields it's at our expense.'

'Oh my god!'

'What's the matter?'

'There's no point in this argument. We just don't talk on the same wavelength.'

A few days later Pathak called. He was in Sangampur to see his mother. 'Ann, hello. Do you think you and Ravi can have dinner with me and then go to a play? There's a superb new play which I have been wanting to see.'

Ann hesitated. He said, 'I know this is very short notice, so if you have other plans, please don't hesitate to say no. I didn't know until the last minute that I was coming today.'

'I would very much like to come, Mohan. May I call you that?'

'Of course. It's an awful name, but such as it is, I am honoured to have you use it.'

'I don't see anything wrong with it. Anyway, as I was saying, I would like to come—'

'I hear a but in it.'

'Unfortunately there is a but in it.'

'Well, never mind. We'll make it some other time.' He sounded disappointed. '*Unless you have tomorrow free. The play is not on, but we can still have dinner together.*'

This time Ann hesitated longer. He said, 'I seem to be posing a dilemma for you. I am sorry. Let's forget it.'

'No, wait. You don't understand. It's—nothing to do with you. Actually after all the hospitality we have enjoyed at your house, I should invite you to have dinner with us. But—well, it's not a very good idea just now. I mean—I wish I could explain.'

'You don't owe me any explanations, Ann,' He said gently. 'It's perfectly all right. Don't be so upset.'

'Thank you, Mohan. Will you call again the next time you are here?'

'I will do that.'

'How is your mother?'

'They have finally done a biopsy. That's why I am here. In a couple of days we'll know the result.'

'Which hospital is she in? If she can have visitors, I would like to go and visit her.'

'She is at Lokmanya. She would be happy to see you.'

'Are you going back today?'

'Yes. Or tomorrow morning, if I go to the play.' Then he added, 'And Ann, hardly anything is as bad as you think, so cheer up, will you?'

31

It was warm, the period of what Ann called freak heat at the end of the monsoon. Her first October in India she had felt outraged when, after the long spell of very pleasant weather, it had

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suddenly turned humid and warm. It was just one of the things, she had discovered, that nobody thinks important enough to warn you about.

The table fan whirled, making the pages of her book flutter every time it turned past her. This irritated her. She put down the book which she didn't feel like reading anyway. She looked in on Rahul who was fast asleep. Then she wandered restlessly into her bedroom and the kitchen. The kitchen counter was dirty and she cursed the maid, smiling to herself at how quickly she had fallen into the custom of the country. She sprinkled Vim on the counter and scrubbed and wiped it, feeling a little better after the expenditure of energy. She turned off the kitchen light and went back to the living room.

It was now almost past the time of the last train Ravi could have taken. But trains were often late, and she thought he might still be back, although she felt in her bones that he was not coming tonight.

He had said, 'If I don't finish my work, I may have to stay over.'

'You only have an appointment with this secretary, don't you?'

'Deputy secretary.'

'So how long can that take?'

'I may have to see someone else. You don't know the way things are done in this country. There are all sorts of delays. People don't like to commit themselves. Especially government officers. They don't like to take decisions unless they refer to ten other authorities. Also they want all sorts of documents which they tell you about only after you go to see them.'

'You were away two days last week.'

'What does that signify? Do you think that I get my kicks out of going through this endless red tape? Do you want to do it? Then I'll happily stay at home.'

'I am sorry, darling. I didn't mean to nag. It's only--well, never mind. Come back as soon as you can.'

No matter what he said, she felt that he wasn't anxious to come back, and this was what troubled her. He went and came and went back, and there was nothing to show that he minded being away, or missed her. And when he was home, it seemed that any conversation they had deteriorated into a quarrel. They heard overtones in each other's simple words, hidden

meanings which were tortuously dragged out to be used as weapons. It seemed that when they were together, hostile words hung in the air and held them taut, like bows poised to discharge a volley of arrows at the slightest provocation.

She heard a taxi stop outside the house and thought, her mood lifting in grateful love, he has come back after all. Things will be better for us now, I'll see to it that they are. I will try to be relaxed and happy, not difficult and stubborn. Then she was surprised to hear the doorbell. Ravi always carried a key and she had not yet bolted the door, it was only on the Godrej latch.

She went to the door and said, 'Who is it?'

A voice said, 'Ann.'

A voice from the past. Her mind slowly travelled from one world to another. She opened the door.

'Jack. Jack LaFrance,' was all she said before she found herself enveloped in a bearhug. Laughing, she disengaged herself, but not before he had planted a kiss squarely on her mouth.

'How are you Ann? You are looking well. And beautiful as ever.'

'I like extravagant compliments, but they should have at least a grain of truth. And how are you? First come in and sit down. What exactly are you doing here? Isn't Ruth with you?'

'She is.'

'Why didn't she come with you?'

'Let's say, she was in no condition to come,' he said.

'Is she ill?'

'I might as well tell you the truth instead of letting you ask a dozen questions. Ruth is an alcoholic. Every evening by this time she is dead to the world.'

'Oh Jack, how awful. How did it start?'

'I don't really know. How do these things start?' He stopped talking, staring ahead, lost in thought. Ann thought he looked ill. His face was gaunt, his eyes were ringed by enormous dark smudges as though he hadn't slept for days. And there was something about the set of his mouth that said that he hadn't laughed for days either.

She said, 'Would you like some coffee?'

He shook himself and said, 'Sure, coffee will be great.'

'Come to the kitchen. I'll make some.'

She bustled about, filling the percolator, putting it on the stove, pouring milk into a pot to heat it, setting out cups, sugar.

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She took out some *ladus* and *chivda* and a plate and said, 'See how you like these. They are typically Indian snacks. I have to keep boxes full of snacks on hand for my son. You do know I have a son?'

'Yes I know. I've been in touch with your mother. I met her just before leaving, to get your address and instructions on how to get to your place.'

'Have you any children?'

'No. You asked how Ruth started drinking. I think what we call the reason is often only the trigger. But insofar as there is a reason, it all started after she lost the babies. She had three miscarriages one after the other. The doctors don't know exactly why. One of those things. After the last one she went into a deep depression. She couldn't seem to care about anything sufficiently to pull herself out of it. That's when she started drinking. There were times before that when she had had drinking jags, but she had been able to leave it. This time it stuck.'

'Can't something be done about it?'

He shrugged. 'Any number of things, but she has to cooperate, as you know.'

Jack had eaten through two *ladus* and a large plate of *chivda*.

Ann said, 'You seem to be hungry.'

'I haven't had any dinner.'

'Why didn't you tell me? I would have cooked something for you.'

'This is fine.'

'I'll cut some bread anyway. There's jam, and cheese. If my memory serves me well, you didn't exactly have a small appetite.'

He smiled, buttered a slice of bread generously, then another, and sandwiched a thick slice of cheese between. He said, 'Your memory serves you very well.'

'Tell me what you are doing. Are you still with the S.F. News?'

'Yes. I am on an extended leave right now. I do articles on people and places and politics and they pay me for whatever they use. It helps pay our way. I had the idea that getting away from everything would help Ruth. You know, new places, new people, something to awaken her interest.' He gave a short laugh. 'I should have known better. You can't get away from

problems by travelling because the problems have a way of travelling with you.'

'Don't say that, Jack. It sounds so defeatist. It's not like you.'

'I guess I feel defeated. But enough about me. Tell me about yourself. What are you doing? Where is your husband?'

'He's away in Bombay, seeing about some licenses. He is going to manufacture a plant growth hormone.'

'That's right. He is an agricultural scientist, isn't he? And what about you?'

She told him about her job and her work in non-formal education.

'Do you enjoy doing it?'

'Very much.'

'And you like living in this country?'

'Oh yes. Yes, I am glad to be here where things are happening, people are awakening to a new era. You know, countries like the United States have long reached a point where they are going on a pretty well charted route. Here anything can happen. That's why it is exciting to be here, to see how one of the oldest civilizations learns to be a newly independent modern state.'

'They are not learning to be anything, as far as I can see. All I have seen is the tremendous apathy, the mental and physical sluggishness of the people. If they have a destiny, they are doing nothing to shape it. It's taking them unawares.'

'How can you say that about a people who threw off the Emergency?'

'And also brought back in the author of the Emergency!'

'That's part of it, too. When the Janata government failed to give them what they expected, they were ready to throw them out too.'

'If they are as enlightened as you say, don't you think it strange that they didn't come up with a better alternative? Isn't there something wrong with a country which can only give its people a choice between fools and crooks?'

'You are oversimplifying, Jack. You don't know enough about this country. Things aren't cut and dried here.'

'Yeah, that's one of the things I have found out. You can't call black black. There are always extenuating circumstances, elaborate justifications. So you end up condoning every crime under the sun. That's what these old civilizations teach you—compromises, face-saving devices. No black, no white. Only grays. They call

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us naive. Well, I'd rather be naive and condemn something I think is wrong, than be like them, no longer even capable of discriminating between right and wrong.'

Ann couldn't help smiling.

'And now you are giving me this pitying smile, to tell me that I can't begin to understand the inscrutable Orient!'

She burst out laughing.

'Don't laugh. I can't understand any of it, and I can't understand why you choose to live in a country like this.'

'I like it here, I am at peace here. I always felt like a misfit there, and today more than ever I wouldn't be able to live with a lot that's happening there.'

'Vietnam's over now, and you aren't a firebrand teenage rebel any longer.'

'It's not just Vietnam. It's everything. The whole foreign policy, the American attitude towards countries like India, their manipulative politics, the CIA. I would mind it all ever more now that I have seen the other side of the coin.'

'And here you find everything to your taste, nothing to rebel against?'

'Of course there are things I would want to rebel against. But somehow, even though this is essentially a traditional, conformist society, rebellion is still possible within the system. The people who took out marches of protest against the Vietnam war were branded unpatriotic freaks, often harassed, excommunicated. Here they neither victimize the rebels nor make a phenomenon out of every rebellion by giving it endless media coverage. They simply weather it. It's a much more elastic society. There are no uniform norms for everyone. There's so much diversity that nothing outrages everyone's sensibilities. And the fabric of social life is so complex that it can take a lot of strain without disintegrating. There's nothing inscrutable about it. It's a very practical and time-tested mode for the survival of a society.'

'That's all fine on a theoretical level, Ann. On the practical level, there's everyday life to cope with, and a thousand small irritations to face.'

'It's better to face small irritations than to make big compromises.'

'Do you know what's happened to you? You've become punch-drunk. You are in love with the idea that you have found a

Utopia, so you have conjured up an image of what you have left that doesn't conform to reality. You ought to come back, to see what it's really like there. You owe yourself a chance to make a fair choice.'

'If you weren't so amusing, I would get mad. Let's just say, I owe it to myself to live in a place where I feel happy and comfortable, and leave it at that, okay?'

Before he left, Jack invited her and Ravi for dinner the next day.

'Why don't you and Ruth come and have dinner with us instead?'

'I have invited a few people I want to meet.'

'I had no idea you knew anyone here.'

'I don't, I just have an introduction to some people whom I want to talk to. You know, get an idea about the currents of opinion about various topics.'

'And that's what you base your articles on?'

'Partly.'

'That's a rather haphazard way of getting information. isn't it? How do you know this is a representative group of people?'

'I have been meeting dozens of people all over and hearing all shades of opinions, so I take it that they must be fairly representative.'

'I don't know if Ravi will be back by tomorrow evening.'

'Then you can come alone. In fact I will come and fetch you.'

'I can get a rickshaw, you know.'

'That leaves you a way out.'

Ravi had not returned by the time Jack came to pick her up. Ruth was with him and she invited them in for a cold drink.

Ruth said, 'I'd love a cool drink. It's so hot here. Johnny, why didn't you tell me it was going to be so hot?'

She pouted and snuggled up to Jack little-girlishly. She steered him to the divan and sat very close to him.

She looked at Ann and said, 'Well well, here's our Ann gone native. You must show me how to wind all that stuff round you.'

Ann smiled and said, 'I'll be glad to show you.'

Ruth had bleached her hair which gave her a brassy look. Her eyes wandered restlessly, and she talked with a defiant brightness which grated on Ann's nerves. *This woman had nothing in common with the pretty, vivacious, funloving girl Ann remembered.*

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Ruth sipped the lemonade Ann handed her and made a face. She unzipped her purse and took from it a small flat bottle which she proceeded to pour into her glass.

'Now Ruth,' Jack said, 'You promised. Give that to me.'

She laughed like a naughty child, poured half the bottle into the lemonade and took a long drink from it. Then she looked at Jack and the laughter died in her eyes, leaving only defiance. Then, as Jack held her glance, even that disappeared, to be replaced by an ingratiating look.

She said, 'Don't be mad at me, Johnny. We want to show Ann of all people what a happy couple we are, don't we?'

She took Jack's hand in hers and played with it and stroked it as though it were a kitten.

Ann couldn't believe that this was happening. Without meeting Jack's eye she said, 'Jack, I was wondering if you would let me out of the dinner. Rahul has a sniffle. He's been cranky. If he wakes up he'll cry when he sees I am not there.'

'Come at least for a short time, Ann. I'll bring you back early, I promise.'

Dinner was at a restaurant called Ruchi. Ann found the other invitees a totally unexciting collection. They uttered platitudes which everyone had heard and read so often that they had stopped meaning anything. Ruth drank more, became very animated, talked too much and made crude jokes, laughing uproariously herself, throwing her synthetic golden head back and exposing her startlingly white throat. Ann, watching her, thought at one point, my god, do I look quite that white?

Once Ann happened to notice Ruth's hand resting on the leg of the man sitting on her left. He was an architect, thirtvish, and wore a pink high-necked kurta and thick glasses which deflected light so that you couldn't see his eyes when you were talking to him. Ann found her eyes being drawn towards the white hand lying on the dark material of his pants, lying there neglected, even unnoticed, to judge from his expression. She felt a little sick.

Several times she tried to excuse herself but Jack wouldn't let her go, pleading with her to wait just a few minutes. Finally after ice cream and coffee when he got up, Ruth said, 'Not so soon, Johnny. I don't want to go back to that stuffy old hotel yet.'

'Time to go, Ruth,' His voice was unexpectedly sharp and she

got up obediently, shaking off his hand on her arm and looking at him as though she hated him. Suddenly, Ann felt very sorry for her.

In the hotel lobby Jack said, 'Come Ruth, I'll take you to your room.'

Ann said, 'Good-night, Ruth. It was nice meeting you again.'

Ruth ignored her. She said to Jack, 'What are you going to do?'

'I am going to leave Ann home and then come back and go to bed.'

'Why can't I go with you?'

'Because you are sleepy and tired. Come, now. Let's not have any more arguments.'

To Ann he said, 'Don't run away. Wait for me.'

Ruth, who was walking towards the lift, suddenly turned and said, 'I hope you enjoy yourself, Ann.'

Every instinct urged Ann to run away, never to see either of them again, but she waited.

When they got to Ann's house Jack paid off the taxi.

'Won't you need it to go back?'

'I'll call another. Or walk.'

Ann didn't know exactly what the portent of this was. She was in no mood to talk about Jack's problems or offer him sympathy. She felt too vulnerable herself to deal with someone else's problems with objectivity. She went to Rahul's room, woke up the maid and sent her home, then stood there for a while fussing with Rahul's covers. Finally she turned off the light and went out.

Jack was standing at a window with his back to the room.

'Jack, why don't you come and sit down? Would you like some coffee?'

'No thank you, Ann.'

'Why is Ruth doing this? Why is she destroying herself and you? Why are you letting her?'

'In some measure I feel responsible.'

'Well, of course. But what's happening is not helping either of you, is it? Maybe it would be a good idea for you to live apart for a while.'

'She would go to pieces altogether, feel I had abandoned her.'

'But you have got to do something. You can't go on like this forever.'

Jack didn't say anything. He sat forward in his chair, hunched, arms dangling between legs, deep in thought. Ann

waited patiently, now involved in his plight in spite of herself, feeling sad that this should be happening to him, feeling that he deserved better.

Suddenly he gave a snort of a laugh and said, 'In a way it would be quite accurate to say that you are at the root of all our troubles.'

'Jack—'

'Please don't be mad. I don't mean personally responsible, I just mean the fact that you had been part of my life before Ruth came. She always knew that she was the second choice, of course, and she resented it.'

'Didn't you ever love her?'

'Love? Who knows? There was a time when we were happy together, and companionable. But Ruth was not content with what we had. She insisted on probing constantly. Women always ask too many questions. They want to milk a relationship until it dries up. She wanted guarantees which I couldn't honestly give, constantly wanting to be told that she was better than you, that I loved her better. Up to a point I played along. But she was insatiable. In the end I hated her for making me lie. One day when she was needling me I told her that you were a far better person than she could ever hope to be, and that I would never love her as much as I had loved you.'

'Jack, how cruel.'

'She drove me to it. If she had only left the past alone, I mean, she had been with other guys before we married, I never went on and on talking about them, asking her whether she loved me as much or more than she had loved anyone else.'

He shook his head and stopped.

'Have you ever considered divorce?'

'As I said, that would probably drive her over the brink.'

'Then what's the way out?'

'There isn't one. I don't look for a way out. I have my work, and things aren't always this bad. Last week in Bombay she was much better. She drank, but she had herself under control. Ever since we came here she has been withdrawn and moody, and that's always a danger signal.'

'It's obvious why. Maybe you shouldn't have come here at all.'

'I couldn't go away without seeing you. Ever since I thought up this stupid trip you have been on the itinerary. Maybe I thought if I saw you as the Indian version of the American

hausfrau, swamped by dishes, battling with a couple of kids and her spreading middle, that would cure me forever.' He smiled wryly.

'But that's what I am,' Ann said. 'Except I have only one kid and a maid who washes the dishes.'

'Talking about the kid, do you think I could take a peek at him?'
'Of course.'

She took him to Rahul's room and put on the overhead light. He stood looking down at the sleeping child for a couple of minutes, then said, 'He is beautiful. May you have many more like him, isn't that a proper Indian blessing?'

Ann turned off the light. In the sudden darkness when she turned she found herself walking into Jack's waiting arms. She was not surprised, because she had seen it in his face all evening. But she was disappointed. She had thought that Jack would be sufficiently sensitive to realize that she would not welcome physical intimacy. He held her very tight and kissed her again and again, and she let him because she did not want to hurt him. But when he started running his hands all over her hungrily, as though he would devour her through his touch, she disengaged herself. She found no answering emotion in herself at all. On the contrary she felt a faint disgust which was not merely physical, although that was also part of it. The carelessness which he had always displayed about the cleanliness of his body and clothes, the smell of stale cigarette smoke mingled with a sweetish after shave lotion—she remembered these things from before, but they seemed worse now than they had when he was a vibrant young man. And there was something else now that clung to him—a smell, a taste, of decay, as though he had given up on life, had been defeated by it, as though Ruth had infected him with the horrible incurable disease which she carried.

He whispered, 'We could have had so much together, Ann. We still can.'

'It was always out of the question, Jack. It still is.'

'Why? It's not your husband. You don't give me the impression of a wife who is very much in love.'

'That's not something that need concern you.'

He stood there, apparently waiting for her to say something more. When she didn't, he finally said, 'All right, Ann. This is a good-bye then. We leave tomorrow for Goa.'

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'Good-bye, Jack, and good luck.'

Around ten the next morning when Jack called, Ann thought, 'What now? I hope he is not going to start the whole thing again.'

'Listen Ann, I just wanted to tell you, so you wouldn't get the shock of your life reading about it in the papers.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Ruth is dead, Ann.'

'No. God, what happened?'

'I don't know, but there's an empty bottle of her sleeping pills by her bed. A doctor will be here soon, and be able to tell, but I think she's been dead a long time. Since last night, probably.'

'What do you mean probably?'

Ann had a bizarre vision of Jack getting into bed with a dead Ruth and sleeping by her body all night.

'We had separate rooms. I didn't go to her room last night after I got back.'

'I see. Jack, it's so awful. What are you going to do? Do you want me to come down there?'

'Good god, no. Why do you want to get involved?'

Later he called again and said that the police might come for her statement.

'I am sorry, but when they questioned me I had to give your name.'

'Of course. It's all right, I don't mind.'

The police took her statement, wrote it down and made her sign it. It seemed that Ruth had probably died during the period when Jack was with her. Luckily 'there was no suspicion of foul play from Jack, because the hotel staff corroborated the approximate times when Jack had left the hotel and come back, the fact that he and Ruth had separate rooms, and, most important, that Ruth's room had been locked on the inside and they had had to break the lock to get in. Ann wondered how much the receptionist had heard earlier in the evening and whether he had reported any of it. The version she and Jack had given was that Ruth had not been feeling well and so they had dropped her at the hotel before going to Ann's house.

Ann also wondered whether it was Jack's going off with her that had driven Ruth over the edge. Why had Jack stayed married to her all these heart-breaking years? Was he being realistic or merely deluding himself when he said that Ruth would have gone to pieces if he had left her? But ultimately

Ruth had disintegrated anyhow, so what did the intervening years achieve? Or had he, in a sick sort of way, come to depend on Ruth, weak, drunken, unbalanced Ruth, to make him feel needed, strong? For that matter, once she discovered that instead of putting her fears and insecurities to rest, he only tormented her, why didn't she leave him? Do people, as the Greeks believed, carry the seeds of their own destruction within themselves?

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'Did you get your work done?' Ann asked

Ravi had finally got back almost two days later than she expected.

'Partially. The man I went to see was not in town, so I had to wait. Finally he didn't get back, would you believe it?'

'Why did you decide to wait two whole days before you gave up on him?'

'I don't know. When you are waiting, you only wait a few hours at a time. You don't think of two days. And he had given me an appointment so I thought he should be back soon.

Finally I got fed up of waiting.'

'That means you will have to go again.'

'I talked to his P.A., explained everything to him and asked him to brief his boss. I am going to call him tomorrow. If he says it can be done without my going back, well and good. Otherwise I will get another appointment.'

'You might as well have done this to begin with, instead of waiting two days.'

'Ann, you think of alternative plans of action only after you find you have to discard the original plan.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cross-question you.'

'I told him about Jack and Ruth'

He said, 'What a mess. It's a pity you had to get involved in it. Jack might have kept your name out of it.'

'How could he, when they asked him where he was during the period when his wife was supposed to have died?'

'Think of the nasty publicity if some reporter pries your name out of the police.'

'Why should it be nasty? I was in no way involved with Ruth's death.'

'If you'll only use your head, Ann. Think of what some unscrupulous reporter can do with the story. Wife commits suicide while husband is visiting former girlfriend.'

Ann said tightly, 'Even if the fact that I was his girlfriend years ago had any bearing on the incident, nobody except you knows it.'

'Why was he visiting you at that time of the night while I was away? People are not as naive as you think. They can put two and two together.'

'And get what? Five?'

He shrugged.

'You can't just shrug it off. You have made an ugly allegation here.'

'I haven't made any allegation. I am merely telling you what sort of construction people are likely to put on the events.'

'People, or you?'

He looked squarely at her. 'What would you think, if you were looking at the facts objectively? What were you doing with him at that time of the night?'

'What do you think I was doing? Making love with him in your bed, is that what you want to hear? Well, I am sorry I can't oblige you. We were talking. Just TALKING. Does that disappoint you?'

'There's no need to become vulgar, or shout. If talk is all you wanted to do, why wasn't his wife with him?'

'Because she didn't want to come. Or she was too drunk to come. What does it matter?'

'It matters a great deal. In this country there are some things you don't do.'

'Don't tell me what I can and cannot do in this country. What was I supposed to do? Tell him I am sorry but my husband is away and I am not permitted to entertain a man in his absence? Well, I am simply not going to do it, no matter what the custom

of the country demands.'

She felt more bewildered than angry. What exactly were they fighting about? Could Ravi really consider her involvement in their marriage so superficial that she would indulge in a sexual episode with an old friend whom she met only briefly and casually?

She was equally astonished at his reaction to the suicide. She had foreseen their talking together about the whole unfortunate affair with the kind of detached philosophical sadness which people who are not directly involved bring to bear upon such occurrences. But he had not even expressed sorrow or horror at the tragedy itself. His only concern had been the possible adverse publicity for her.

She squelched as childish an impulse to call Jack and to go to see him, just to spite Ravi. They had said goodbye and she did not particularly wish to see him again. He was flying home the next day, taking Ruth's body back. He had seemed not grief-stricken, but rather lost and sad. He told Ann that he had always known that the end would come like this, because Ruth had tried several times to commit suicide.

Ann undressed and lay on the bed but couldn't sleep, and what kept her awake was not Jack and Ruth and the way their relationship had got snarled up. Disturbing as that had been, it had already receded into the distance. It concerned her only peripherally, and Ravi was at the centre of her thoughts. She kept going over their conversation but after what seemed hours found herself no closer to understanding him. How could someone she thought she knew pretty thoroughly behave so unpredictably?

She must have dozed off, because she awoke when she heard Ravi come into the room. She heard his movements, then he went out again, and she must have slept. She suddenly felt her cover being pulled off and her pajamas being torn off her.

Then his hands and lips were all over her, touching, kissing roughly, hungrily. She was too surprised to protest, and before she could think of protesting, she found herself responding, *straining to be enveloped by him. Although she sensed that he was using love to express anger—at what she didn't know—she found herself floating in a euphoric haze. She thought that this was something precious between her and Ravi and so long as it kept on being stated and restated, their relationship stood on a*

sound footing. She thought of Jack and the memory of how unmoved his touch had left her reinforced her feeling.

'Ann.'

'Sh! Don't say anything.'

'Will you forgive me? I am such a beast to you. I don't know what happens. It's almost like something possesses me.'

She pulled him towards her, and ran her hand through his thick mop of hair and over his face, tracing with her fingers the wide forehead, the curve of the eyebrows, the small straight nose, the firm flat surface of his lips. She smelled his clean smell. He was always neat and clean, with a just-scrubbed boyish look about him. He was never slovenly in his personal habits.

The things she had always loved about him were the same, yet there was something missing, something which had definitely been part of him—a zest for life, a willingness to explore the world around him, prepared to be charmed and amused by it. They had had so much fun doing all sorts of things. Even a visit to a grocery store was an adventure. Why was he unwilling to enjoy life here? It was as if he had left behind his capacity for enjoyment. By rejecting the whole range and quality of life here, he had made their life barren, and then become bored with it. He behaved as though nothing here was worth laughing at, or taking seriously, or being observed with avid interest. Ann saw now that there could be only one reason for this. He had never meant to come back to India. Or had meant to come for only a short visit. But then why had he been less than honest with her? Or perhaps it was not fair to call him dishonest. Perhaps he had felt that he only had to bring her to India to make her see how impossible it was for them to live here. Perhaps he had expected her to provide the impetus to return to America, thereby providing a sop for his parents as well as his conscience. She admitted that she was not blameless. Blind to his needs, she had trapped him into a role he had never meant to play. How could she now make him see that when he talked nostalgically about his days in America, he was responding to a country where he was young and in love, happy and free, without identity and without responsibility, so that he could enjoy the good things and dissociate himself from the bad things which would otherwise have troubled or saddened him or made him ashamed? Why didn't he realize that you couldn't remain a temporary sojourner anywhere forever?

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'Shri, how nice. How are you? Come in. How's your work going?'

Shri smiled at her exuberance. 'You haven't changed at all. Ann. I think you are one of the constants in my life.'

'Do people change? Have you changed?'

'Y-yes. I have, somewhat.'

'In what way?'

'I wish I could say I have become wiser, more mature. But all it really means is more cynical.'

'Have you become cynical? Aren't things working out the way you expected?'

'Let's say, my expectations were unrealistic. About people, mostly. But if I am disappointed, I have only myself to blame.'

'What do you mean?'

'I had thought that people do this kind of work because for one reason or another they are interested in it. But I have discovered that it is only one of the many activities people use for getting publicity, money, political advantage. Nobody seems interested in how much the villagers benefit from the programme. They are only interested in sending people down to photograph smiling villagers and publishing expensive coloured brochures printed on art paper so that people can read them and applaud. Actually they have only formed the trust for getting tax rebates, not because they care anything about the people it's supposed to benefit. They have created a structure which will vie with any government bureaucracy, and which eats up many times the amount of money spent on the programmes.'

'You are very bitter, Shri.'

'I shouldn't be so bitter. Because after all, they have put this trust in the trust and a few people like me can make use of it to do the things that need to be done. I shouldn't complain.'

'I have found some of this too in the Family Welfare Centre. I guess people are the same everywhere. Why should one expect them to be honest and dedicated and selfless just because they are working in the field of social service?'

'You are asking the question the wrong way around. Why should they be working in this field unless they are honest, dedicated, etc.?''

'It's just a job for them.'

Shri sighed. 'I suppose you are right. Anger at this sort of people is not a constructive emotion. One should do what one thinks is right and forget about everything else.'

Ann almost smiled. One way or another, Shri had to reduce life to simple terms. He would not stay disillusioned or cynical for long, because he would restate his terms of reference in such a way as to allow himself to remain an idealist.

He said, 'Ravi is working very late?'

'He works late often these days. He is finding out that you can't count the hours when you are working for yourself.'

'What's he doing?'

'Oh, didn't you know? He is manufacturing this plant hormone they have called Growell. Have you heard of it?'

'No, but I've heard of a couple of others.'

'You don't sound as though you think much of them.'

'Frankly, I don't. I don't think they have the miraculous powers the manufacturers claim. Some such new product comes out every few years and then fizzles out. One time it was rhizobium, then it was micronutrients. Now it's plant growth regulators.'

'Ravi says several such products are already being widely used.'

'Those are different. They have specific applications, like gibberellic acid, or weed-killers. It's the magical yield-boosters I am talking about. But of course that's only my personal opinion, and I could be wrong.'

'For Ravi's sake, I hope you are.'

Shri was silent for a long moment and when Ann looked at him she found him watching her speculatively.

'What is it, Shri?'

'I don't know whether to tell you this, Ann. I dislike people who cause harm by passing on gossip, and God knows I don't wish you any harm. But—well, I'll tell you anyway, then you can judge for yourself.'

Somehow, Ann felt she knew what was coming. All the vague suspicions which she had resolutely pushed out of her mind, crystallized, and she knew what shape they would take. Shri's revelation would not come as a surprise after all.

Shri continued, 'I have to go to Bombay quite often, you know, in connection with my work. And—well, during the past few months I saw Ravi and Usha together twice—in places and situations where it didn't seem natural for them to be together. There you are. That's all. I just thought you should know.'

He finished on an apologetic note, avoiding looking at her.

She said, quietly, 'There's no need for you to sound apologetic, Shri. You did right in telling me. Thank you.'

It didn't occur to her to doubt the truth of what Shri had told her. Nor did she find it necessary to ask him to elaborate the circumstances under which he had seen Usha and Ravi. She knew with the kind of certainty with which one knows that a word fits a crossword clue exactly right.

Even while she debated whether she was going to act on the information, silently protesting that she should have been exposed to this ridiculous situation, a small part of her felt relieved. She had not been baselessly suspicious and paranoid when she questioned Ravi about all those overlong visits to Bombay, and balked at accepting his explanations, which rang slightly false. And there was another thing. Usha had suddenly dropped out of her life. She had not thought much of it, thinking that Usha must be busy, but noting her absence because she had come to depend on her frequent visits.

Once Ravi's and Usha's absence from Sangampur had coincided. She had gone to Usha's house and Usha's mother-in-law had said, 'She makes such a noise about how much she loves the girl, but she is constantly going gadding off leaving the poor child alone. Who is supposed to look after the child while she's gone, I would like to know?'

Usha's mother-in-law had enjoyed saying this to a friend of Usha's. Ann had thought that she was probably exaggerating, but now she wondered. Long after Shri had left, Ann was not sure exactly what she felt, what impact the knowledge of Ravi's faithlessness—such an old-fashioned word—had on her. She decided that she did after all belong to a simple world, mentally anyway, where it was unforgivable. But what then was she going to do about it? Simply walk out? No, she didn't

see herself doing that, she didn't want to do it. Then she told herself with grim humour that it might not be left up to her to decide what she wanted. It gave her a fresh jolt to think that the assumptions on which she based her relationship with Ravi might not be valid.

She couldn't bring herself to push all this aside and make ordinary conversation. Ravi asked her, 'Why are you so quiet tonight? Is something bothering you?'

They were eating, and Rahul, who had somehow got into the habit of staying awake until quite late, was playing in the living room, bringing something to show Ann or telling or asking her something and going off again after she had responded to him absent-mindedly.

Ann shook her head slightly at Ravi's question. He said, 'But there is something on your mind. What is it?'

And so she blurted it out in the middle of dinner.

'Are you having an affair with Usha?'

She was watching him. His hand stopped in its progress towards his mouth. His jaw muscles tightened and then relaxed.

He said, 'What kind of a question is that?'

'Let's dispense with the fencing. The least I deserve is straight truth.'

For a moment he looked at her, and she couldn't read his look. He said almost gently, 'Well look, Ann. All questions can't be answered yes or no.'

'Then let me make it simpler for you. Have you been sleeping with her? If you prefer that to the word 'affair.'

'Listen. Don't look at me like that. I am not trying to dodge the issue. I have not been "sleeping" with her, or having an affair. It's happened exactly twice. We happened to be travelling to Bombay on the same train. She was going to see her professor -- her Ph.D. guide, he is in Bombay University now—to discuss some things about her thesis. Anyway, we decided to meet for lunch. One thing led to another and—it just—happened. I mean there was nothing pre-planned about it.'

'And the second time? Was that also extempore?'

He didn't say anything.

'That means it was pre-planned. Tell me, the first time, did you go to a hotel?'

'Ann, stop it. It's not going to help either of us to hash over the details.'

'Are you now in the process of planning for a third encounter?'

'No.'

'Do you want to marry her?'

He raised his voice, 'No. I don't want any permanent relationship with her. It was just a—passing madness. I don't know what to call it. But it's over, whatever it was.'

Ann was silent. There was nothing left to say. She washed her hands and collected the dirty dishes, put them in the kitchen sink and ran water over them. Then she picked up Rahul, put him in his crib and gave him his bottle.

'Ann, say something. What are you thinking about?'

'Nothing. I don't know what to think. All I would like to know is, why. Was it just an expression of what the psychologists are fond of calling man's essentially polygamous nature? Or the desire to take advantage of an opportunity that had presented itself? Or a need to punish me?'

'It was none of these things.'

'Then what was it?'

'I told you. A passing madness.'

'Yes. But how does a passing madness come about? Would someone else have inspired it? Any other woman? Or was it specifically Usha?'

'I suppose it was specifically Usha. This conversation is bizarre.'

'Then it means you found her attractive. Did you plan this ever since you met her at that party? Did you want to find out what you had missed?'

'Ann, you've got to stop this. I told you I didn't plan anything.'

'You are right. I must stop torturing myself. I know it's morbid, but I can't stop myself. Would you say the passing madness took hold of you because of me? Because you felt there was something lacking in our relationship which she could provide?'

'Ann, for God's sake—'

'All right, I'll stop. Stop talking, that is. But I won't be able to stop thinking about it. You know that, don't you? Why did you do this?'

There were tears in her eyes which she hid from him by turning away.

'Ann, what are you going to do?'

'I don't know Ravi. I just don't know.'

Ravi must have told Usha that Ann knew, perhaps to warn her against coming to see Ann. However, it had the opposite effect.

When she saw her Ann said, 'Well, what brings you here? How come I am no longer an outcast?'

'Why do you say that?'

'You certainly haven't shown yourself around here for a long time. You used to come fairly often before that, remember? In fact, I also remember that we were quite good friends.'

'Ann, I don't know what to say to you. I can only say that I am sorry, that I didn't mean to hurt you. I know you condemn me and I haven't come to justify myself.'

'Why have you come?' Ann wanted to sound merely curious but her voice was cold and Usha winced at it.

'Just to say I am sorry. I want you to know that what happened won't be repeated. I never meant to steal Ravi from you.'

Ann smiled, 'That's very large-hearted of you.'

'Please, I didn't mean it that way. It was all a mistake—a —'

'Passing madness?'

'You can put it that way. Anyway, it's past, whatever it was. I only—I hope—I mean I don't want it—'

She fumbled, blushed and lapsed into silence after giving Ann a look of appeal. So that's what has brought her here, Ann thought.

'You don't want it to get back to your fiance, is that it? Don't worry, it won't through me. You can be sure of that. I am not one of those who enjoy breaking up other people's marriages.'

'Ann—' Usha's voice broke and she started crying miserably.

'Don't you think I am the one who ought to be crying?' All the bitterness, the misery of the last few days concentrated itself into the cutting sarcasm with which Ann spoke.

Usha said, 'I know I am making a fool of myself. But you can afford not to despise me. You can afford to forgive me. You see, you have nothing to blame yourself with, nothing to haunt your conscience.'

With this Usha abruptly got up and left. Her tear-smudged face moved Ann to something like pity. But she didn't call her back. She thought, maybe I can afford to forgive, but not yet. Maybe someday I can look back at all this and it will evoke nothing more than a sad smile.

She told Ravi that evening that Usha had come to see her.

'Did she?' was all Ravi said.

'She assured me that she didn't intend to steal you from me.'

Ravi said nothing. Since he had told her about Usha, they had not talked except for the minimum exchange necessary during the course of the day.

'Were you available for stealing?'

'Ann, I told you no. It was nothing serious. Whatever happened hasn't changed anything between us, unless you want it to. The question is, do you?'

'I don't know.'

He looked at her helplessly and kept quiet.

She felt a great reluctance to analyse her own feelings and, even more, take some sort of action. Weeks passed, and she realized that her original reaction to Ravi's revelation had blunted. Ravi seemed to treat her with extra consideration and even gentleness. In fact, they no longer had the bitter arguments that they had had earlier, and their relationship became quite pleasant. Ann felt that it had entered a new plane, a sort of placid uncaring phase which Ann was not at all sure she liked.

At one point she thought, if this is all that marriage is going to be, the sharing of a roof and nothing else, it's not worth preserving. But she did not see herself walking out over Usha. Perhaps it was the simple passage of time, but her mental turbulence over the event itself had quieted down. What rankled was the fact that Ravi was so ready to put it aside and resume their normal life. She herself was unable to forget so completely and go back to where they had been. Something had gone out of their relationship, perhaps forever, and Ann felt an overwhelming sadness for the loss. Yet she found herself reluctant to face the possibility of ending the relationship. She still loved Ravi, and she felt certain that he still cared for her. And she had become dependent on his presence in her life. She didn't know what she would do if she did leave him, and none of the scenarios she could visualize seemed acceptable.

One day she said to him, 'The great crises in one's life just sort of fizzle out, don't they?'

She thought, what is it, ultimately, that hurts? Surely not the images evoked by the idea of Ravi and Usha making love, not the actual physical event. What then? The deceit, the betrayal of trust? In a way of course, deceit is inevitable. Granting that the incident took place, she couldn't really expect Ravi to come

to her and say, 'Look, darling, I am afraid I slept with Usha the other day.' No, it wasn't the deceit. It really was just the fact that it had happened, that he had let it happen, perhaps willed it to happen, and that Usha had been his partner. If he had only been dissatisfied with his sexual life, he could have gone to a whore but he hadn't. The inescapable conclusion was that under the surface a strong attraction must have existed between the two, enough to send caution to the winds and jeopardize their relationship with her. It also meant that the attraction still existed. Yet Ravi had said that whatever had happened did not indicate a desire for a permanent relationship with Usha. Ann believed him, but strangely, it somehow hurt more that the episode had been such a casual, unthinking affair.

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Usha said, 'We have decided to get married. We are going to Baroda. Arun has got a job there, and there is a possibility that I also will. So I thought—I wanted to say good-bye.'

She said it in one breath, as though afraid that Ann was going to shut the door in her face.

'At least come in. You are not going to say good-bye from the door and go, are you?'

Usha gave an uneasy laugh. 'I have been wanting to come and see you, but I didn't know whether you would like it.'

Ann didn't say anything.

'You will probably think me hypocritical, but you have been my closest friend here. Actually my only friend, other than Arun. I couldn't just leave without seeing you.'

'Of course not,' Ann said quietly. 'You bring good news. But tell me more. What about Rasika?'

'There's no point in fooling myself that the situation will change, Ann. My mother-in-law will not give me Rasika. I have

been told that I would get custody if I get a sympathetic judge. But my mother-in-law will charge that I am a woman of bad character and unfit to be Rasika's mother. If the judge is a conservative man, she will be able to make the charge stick. Where will that leave me? Of course I can go on appealing and so on. But I don't want to subject Rasika or myself to legal battles. Considering all this, it would be pointless for us to wait. Besides, it is getting more and more difficult for me to live under my mother-in-law's roof. I have come to the point where I feel I can't stand it another day.'

'Have you set the date?'

'It will be sometime next week. We gave the notice a month ago.'

'Where will the wedding be?'

Usha laughed. 'The registrar's office.'

'Who all will be there?'

'Just the two of us, a couple of friends of Arun's. Unless you and Ravi come. Would you consider it?'

'Why not? You weren't thinking of not inviting us at all, were you?'

There were tears in Usha's eyes which she blinked away. She shook her head. 'Then after the wedding we will all go somewhere and celebrate. You must have a wedding feast,' Ann said.

'Oh Ann, you are so generous. I can never thank you enough.'

'Doesn't Arun have any family?'

'Of course he does, but you can't imagine that any family would approve of his marrying a widow with a child, can you? It's a good thing in a way, because otherwise we might have had to live with them. And it's beyond me to cope with a second set of in-laws. In fact I have always made it a condition of our marriage. Arun only said that it would be an awkward situation if we made a separate home right here in Sangampur. Why. I don't know. Men are funny that way. Even when they see the rationale behind something, they won't do it if it involves hurting the feelings of their family. They never cut their apron strings. Anyhow, I am just as happy making a break from this place.'

'You will be that much farther away from Rasika.'

'True, but really my being here is not going to be any help, because I still won't get to see her without a struggle. On the

other hand, once I go away and my mother-in-law feels secure in her possession of the child, she might relent enough to let her come and visit me occasionally.'

Ravi thought Ann was crazy to plan a celebration for Usha's wedding.

'What for?'

'You might have forgotten, Ravi, but she and I have been very good friends. She has done a lot for me, and I can't let her have a familyless, friendless wedding.'

He shrugged.

'Ravi, I think I have now come to a point where I can talk about what happened. Do you want to talk?'

'If you want to, but I can't see any point in hashing things over again.'

'There is a point for me. I want to know why.'

'There's no why. I told you that.'

'There has to be. You can't tell me that if you had been perfectly satisfied with our relationship you would have done this.'

'The two things have nothing to do with each other.'

'Do you mean to tell me that it will happen again if the opportunity presents itself, no matter what you feel about me?'

Ravi didn't think this deserved an answer.

Over and over she kept asking herself how they had arrived here. Was it a failure of understanding on her part? Love, of course, is only an emotional response. If it is not ramified by more permanent, wider-based ties, can it by itself suffice to hold a relationship together indefinitely? Is this what happens when a marriage goes wrong? Were the bickering, nagging, arguments only symptoms of deeper trouble and I was too *dense to see it*? How and where did I fail? Or was it something inherent in our marriage? Yet Indians seem to believe that almost any two people can, if they have the will to do so, make a marriage work. Can that be true?

One day when they were in bed Ravi made a tentative gesture and she found herself stiffening.

He said, 'Ann, you have got to make up your mind whether you are going to let this thing ruin our relationship forever.'

'Do you have no responsibility in it?'

'I have acknowledged my responsibility and apologized for

it. I have assured you it won't happen again, and even when it did happen it was not intended as an insult to you. What more do you want me to do? I am not going to crawl or hang my head in shame the rest of my life. So it's really up to you. Either you learn to accept the situation or we call it quits. I can't go on this way.'

Ann couldn't say anything. He didn't try to touch her again that night.

As the day of the wedding approached, Ann began to feel that maybe she had been unwisely impulsive to have agreed not just to go to the wedding but to give Usha a party afterwards. Once she let her thoughts take this direction, she began to feel panicky. How am I going to get through the day? Pleading ill-health would be too obvious a ploy and she refused to stoop to using it. She promised herself that she would make whatever effort was necessary to seem completely normal. After inviting herself, she couldn't allow herself to sit glumly through the wedding.

It turned out that Ann need not have worried. Usha would not have noticed what Ann's mood was. On the morning of the wedding day, she arrived at Ann's door in a rickshaw. She carried two suitcases containing, she said, all her worldly possessions.

'Although I don't know that one has anything other than worldly possessions,' she remarked. She looked haggard, nervous and brittle.

She had told her parents-in-law only that morning that she was going to get married, whereupon her mother-in-law had ordered her out of the house immediately. She had then packed her bags under the vigilant eye of her mother-in-law who would allow her to take nothing except *personal clothing, chappals, cosmetics, a few articles of jewellery which had been hers before her marriage. Nothing else. Her mother-in-law claimed that as everything else had been bought with her son's money, Usha had no claim to it.*

At one point I was so disgusted with her I felt like throwing contents of the bags at her and walking out. But I couldn't. And it would have had no effect on her anyway. The case—she pointed at the battered brown one—though it might fall apart at any moment and by a rope, I had to beg from her. She very

reluctantly agreed to let me have it. A wedding present, you might say.'

She had said good-bye to Rasika.

'Mummie, where are you going?'

'To Baroda.'

'Why?'

'I've got a job there.'

'Why don't you get a job here?'

'I couldn't get one.'

'Will I come to you later?'

'Yes, darling.'

But after the way her mother-in-law had behaved, Usha's hopes that she might send the child to visit her had been dashed.

She said, 'I should have told Rasika earlier about my getting married. Now she knows nothing. I couldn't spring it on her at the parting moment. And now she will hear only my mother-in-law's version. God knows what she will think of me.'

Ann said, 'Why didn't you ever take her into your confidence earlier?'

'I don't know how much she could have understood. How could I tell her I was marrying someone she has never even met? If Arun had been able to come and see me, if Rasika had gradually got to know him, it would have been different. Now that horrible woman will fill her full of lies, and the child will hate me.'

'You can write to her.'

'They won't let her have my letters.'

'Maybe you can write here and I can give her your letters.'

'That's right. In school.'

Ann nodded. Ravi came out of the bedroom saying, 'What is it Ann? What's the commotion?' Then he saw Usha and said, 'Oh.'

'She was ordered out of her mother-in-law's house bag and baggage,' Ann said. Ravi said 'Oh' again. Ann couldn't help laughing.

'Don't just say oh. Sit down. Talk to her. I'm making breakfast for everyone. And coffee.'

'Coffee is Ann's panacea, just like the Englishman's cup of tea,' Ravi said.

When it was time to go to the registrar's office, Ann asked Usha whether she didn't want to dress up a bit.

'I don't feel in the mood.'

'Ah, come. At least change into a prettier sari, wash your face, put on a bit of makeup. You are getting married.'

Usha looked more cheerful after she had got dressed, but there was still a pall of gloom over the wedding ceremony and the party afterwards. Ann had been curious to see Arun. She had never met him. Usha had never brought him to meet them. What was stranger, she never talked about him. Ann had almost begun to think that he was not real, but a figment of Usha's imagination. She had not expected anything special, but she was still a bit disappointed when she finally saw Arun. As she told Ravi later, he seemed too tame and quiet for Usha. Ravi said if he had been more like Usha they would do nothing but fight.

After the lunch was over, Usha and Arun collected her baggage and went to a hotel from where that night they would go to the station to catch their train.

Usha said to Ann, 'I hope you won't lose touch, Ann. The moment we are settled there, I will write and send you our address. If you feel like it, you can write to me. Or maybe come and visit us, if you ever feel the need to get away from it all.'

'Why, thank you Usha. I am touched. I really am. And don't give me an invitation unless you mean it, because I am very likely to take you up on it.'

'Oh I hope you do.'

When they were gone Ann asked Ravi, 'Aren't you going to work?'

'No, it's too late. And anyway I don't feel in the mood.'

'It was a bit gloomy wasn't it?'

'I don't know what the point is in getting married, if you are going to pull such a long face about it.'

'She couldn't forget about Rasika, I guess. I somehow feel I wouldn't have given in so easily. I would have fought tooth-and-nail to retain custody of my child.'

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Growell had a favourable reception the first season, and gave good results. And suddenly the next season, after they had gone into full-scale production, it flopped. Ravi didn't know what had hit him.

His father said, smiling, 'Let this be a lesson to you. If you learn from it.'

'What's there to learn? How could we have foreseen that three rival products would suddenly appear on the market, backed by aggressive sales campaigns? They ate disastrously into our market.'

'A good businessman has to foresee all contingencies. That you didn't foresee something is no excuse for failure. Why *shouldn't you expect others to have the same idea that you did?* Are you the only smart man in the world?'

Ann wished her father-in-law wouldn't be so patronizing.

Ravi said, 'We are not good businessmen, I guess. So we have decided to fold up. Cut our losses.'

'Good god, why? What if you had a bit of a loss? In business there are bound to be ups and downs.'

'But we had a good product. We should have been able to sell it.'

'You are an innocent, my boy. Granted, you have a good product. How do people know it's a good product? It's your job to convince them, not only that it's a good product but also that it's better than other products. When you have competition, everything depends on your skill in selling, and that's where you fell down. Never mind. One can always learn from one's mistakes. In modern industry selling is more important than production. Now you can pay more attention to it. Have a bigger budget for advertising, appoint salesmen. You should have a talk with my sales manager. He will help you plan a campaign. He is a good man.'

'It will mean a lot of money. I don't think a bank will finance us.'

'They will if I stand guarantee. Or I can give you the money myself. What is there?'

'But the risk, Appa.'

'I am willing to take it.'

'Well, I don't think I am.'

'You don't have to. You can pay yourself a salary. That way you won't be risking anything.'

'What will you get out of it?'

'The profits. I am convinced you will make a profit, if this thing is done properly.'

'We may not make a profit.'

'If you don't, I will write it off. What you don't seem to realize is that it's not such a large amount of money.'

'Still, I wouldn't want the responsibility.'

'Why are you so fainthearted?'

'It's not a question of being fainthearted. I have realized that this is not my sort of thing, that's all. Running after licenses and chasing files, banging your head against government bureaucracy, peddling your products by all sorts of gimmicks. I don't enjoy any of it. I am a scientist, not a bloody entrepreneur or salesman.'

'Then why did you go into this kind of venture in the first place?'

'Because I was a fool, that's why. I didn't know all that it would involve.'

'If you are such a defeatist that you would run from the field rather than accept a challenge, then there's only one thing you can do. Wind up.'

Ann could not share her father-in-law's contempt for Ravi, but she knew that she would have had more respect for him if he had shown the resilience to stay with it and make good, especially when finance was not a problem. For his own sake, quitting when he was down was not a good idea, but she knew that reasoning with him would do no good.

In the days that followed she felt that Ravi was back where he had been after their arrival in India, floundering, unable to find exactly what he wanted, unwilling to make any compromises and accept what was available. He said he was going to look for ~~but~~ but made no particular move in that direction. He spent

most of his time at home, reading or listening to the radio, feeling depressed and totally unresponsive to her efforts to brighten the atmosphere.

'Ravi, you've got to start somewhere. How long can you go on like this?'

'Do you feel I am sponging on you?'

'Of course not. You have as much right to live off my earnings as I do to live off yours. That's not the point. But you can't just sit around doing nothing and getting more and more depressed.'

'What do you suggest that I do?'

'At least go out, see people. What's the use of sitting around and moping?'

'What do you think I feel like when you go out and work and I sit here doing nothing, living off you?'

Ann started laughing. 'I am sorry, I can't help it. Don't look so grim. What do you think a woman feels like when she is in that position?'

'A woman at least has shopping, cooking, looking after a baby—something to keep her busy, give her self-respect.'

'Is there anything that stops you from doing all these things?'

'People will laugh at me.'

'They will laugh only if you act as though it's something to laugh at. If you behave as though it's the most natural thing to do, they will stop laughing. Lots of men help with housework and children these days, even in India. There's nothing wrong with it.'

But Ravi did not take her seriously.

One day she invited Pathak for dinner. She hadn't heard from him in a long time and then suddenly he called saying that he had been in Bombay with his mother. The doctors' fears had been proved right and she had stomach cancer. She had received chemotherapy but now refused to take any treatment. She was now in Sangampur at his uncle's place and he came to spend as much time with her as he could.

Ravi said, 'Where did you meet him?'

'He called.'

'Where was I? I didn't hear you talk on the phone.'

'Maybe you were in the bathroom, or out in the garden. What does it matter?'

'What was he calling for?'

'Just to say he was in town and to ask if we would have dinner with him. So I invited him instead.'

'Without consulting me?'

'What is there to consult about?'

'I might have had some other engagement.'

'But you don't, do you?'

'You take too much for granted. Just because I have no job and you are supporting me, you think you can organize my life to suit you. You treat me like a court jester whom you trot out to entertain your guests.'

'If that's the way you feel, you are welcome to go out. I am perfectly capable of entertaining my guests by myself. I don't need any court jesters.'

A little later he said, 'I am sorry. I guess I feel that every decision you take without referring to me somehow diminishes me. I know you don't mean it that way, but I—'

'It's all right Ravi. Actually I invited him because I thought it would cheer you up a bit to have company. Also he might have some ideas about a job for you.'

'What ideas can he have? He knows nothing about my field.'

'He does know something.'

'A lot of good that did me. He didn't lift a finger to help us sell our product.'

'That's not fair. He had never promised to help you sell.'

Ann had not hoped that the evening would be a roaring success, but she had not counted on Ravi's almost total noncooperation.

Pathak complimented her on the meal. Then he remarked upon the bowlful of roses in the living room.

Ann said, 'They are from our garden.'

'Really?'

'Yes. I kept seeing this perfectly marvellous rose garden on the way to my school, and one day I stopped to look at it. It turned out to be a nursery run by a woman who claims she learned it all from books. She was a housewife who wanted something to do in her spare time. And now she runs this nursery and sells all kinds of plants. So I bought these roses from her and put them in our garden. And you can see how well they are doing.'

'They are indeed. Do you know flower farming is getting to be quite popular these days? And profitable too.'

'Maybe you should do flower farming Ravi, instead of looking for a job.' Of all the jobs Ann had suggested he do around the

house, the only thing that seemed to have interested him was gardening.

Pathak said, 'Are you looking for a job? I thought after working for yourself you would be reluctant to take a job. I would any day work for myself.'

Ravi said testily, 'It's all right for people who have ancestral land or a family business and plenty of capital to talk about working for themselves.'

Pathak said, with a little laugh, 'Well, you have a family business—several businesses, as a matter of fact, and ancestral land.'

To this Ravi did not respond.

Pathak excused himself soon after dinner and Ann went to the gate with him, even though she knew that Ravi would probably make an ugly scene when she went back into the house.

She said, 'I am sorry. With Ravi in the sort of mood he is in, I probably shouldn't have invited you at all.'

'I didn't mind him. I enjoyed the evening. Thank you for going to so much trouble over the meal. It was superb.'

'You are welcome.'

'Ann, I must see you again. Can you meet me somewhere tomorrow? After school?'

'Well, I don't know—'

'Don't put me off please. I have to see you.'

'What's so urgent? Ravi is home most of the day, you see, so I don't like to be away more than I can help.'

'Are you saying you don't want to see me?'

'It's not that.'

'I know what Ravi is like. I know also that he is jealous of me. I would be deaf and blind not to see it.'

'Then why do you want to see me and compound the problem?'

'There's a very good reason why, and I'll tell it to you tomorrow. Between five and five thirty. At Saras.'

'Okay. Now I'd better run. Goodnight.'

He was waiting for her when she got to the restaurant the next day. He ordered coffee and insisted that she have something to eat.

Then he said, 'What's happening between you and Ravi?'

She had wondered what it could be that he wanted to see her about, but nothing had prepared her for this particular question nakedly put. Her instinct was to tell him it was none of his

business. She didn't know why he had made such a production of asking her to come and meet him. Just to ask her this? It was all very strange.

She said, 'As you know, Growell didn't sell as well as expected. So they are thinking of folding up. I guess Ravi is a bit depressed about it. He doesn't know how to take failure in his stride.'

'That's not what I was talking about. I was asking you what's happening between you. It doesn't take brilliance to see that things are not going very well, in fact have not been going well for some time, and it has nothing to do with Growell flopping.'

She didn't say anything.

He went on, unperturbed by her silence, 'Last night you mentioned that he was looking for a job. The way you said it, it occurred to me that you didn't know that he is negotiating with someone in the U.S. about a job. Are you aware of it?'

'How do you know this?'

'A friend of mine, Anoop Singh.'

'He was one of Ravi's partners in the Growell deal I didn't know he was a friend of yours.'

'Not a close friend, but we know each other. I hadn't seen him for some time and the other day when we ran into each other we discovered that we have a friend in common and got to talking about Ravi. He talked about Growell—that's when I learned that he was a partner in the business—and then mentioned that Ravi was seeking a job abroad.'

'Did he give any specific information?'

'No. I didn't like to ask too many questions. But I got the impression that it was something more definite than mere probing around.'

Again Ann was silent, absorbing this. She wondered why he had gone to the trouble of telling her this. It was not really his business. Even if he had discovered that she knew nothing about it, it was still not his business.

He said, 'If Ravi does go, are you going with him?'

'I don't know.'

'How can you not know?'

'I really don't. I came here with Ravi, so I suppose I should go back with him. But I certainly don't want to go at a moment's notice. I've got used to living here. I feel that I have made a certain investment in my life here. I have never thought in terms

of going back.'

He pressed her, 'But if he does go, if you are *forced to take* a decision, what will it be?'

'It's a big if, Mohan, and a big question. I can't believe that he is actually making definite plans without consulting me at all. And if he is, at this moment I can't possibly say what I will do. I will think about it seriously only if I am faced with the decision.'

She expected some reaction from him, but he only nodded slowly, as though he was taking in what she had said. She felt, as often, off balance with him, and it made her angry.

She said, 'Did you call me here just to tell me this? You could just as well have told me last night. Why make such a production out of it? What does it matter to you whether Ravi goes or stays, whether I go or stay?'

'It matters nothing to me whether he goes or stays. but it matters a great deal whether you go or stay '

'Why?'

'Because I care about you Look,' he spread his hands helplessly. 'I don't know how to say this properly. As you said, you like living here. I don't know why. This is not a country that has much to offer. I have always thought that only people who were born here could live here, because they feel most at home here. I don't even blame people who want to go and seek their fortune in a more promising environment, except that I feel they should stay and help better the environment here rather than running away. But chance has brought you here, and I don't like the idea that you might be forced to go back when you may not want to, simply because you would be alone in a foreign country without him. I just want you to know that you will not be alone. If you decide to stay.'

He refused to look at her. This was what he had wanted to say to her, and it was not much.

She said, 'What exactly are you trying to say?'

Now he did look at her. 'You are not the sort to let one get away with anything vague, are you? Very well, I'll try to be more specific. I've come to care a great deal for you, Ann.' He still would not say the word 'love' and she respected him for it. 'I have felt for a long time that you are the sort of woman with whom I can have the kind of relationship I expect in a marriage. I have never expressed my feelings not because I was a coward or didn't want to commit myself, but because it would have

been unfair to Ravi. Although lately I have known that things were not quite all right between you, I was reluctant to make my feelings known, telling myself that all marriages have their storms and manage to weather them. But when I knew that you might go away, I couldn't let you go out of my life for good without saying what I felt. So,' he looked at her levelly, 'there it is.'

She said, 'Thank you, Mohan.' Just that. She was incapable of saying anything more, and he didn't ask her to, for which she was grateful. It was all a bit too much for her to assimilate. As for the way he felt towards her, she refused to dwell on it. She liked him, admired many of his qualities. She also felt a certain amount of attraction for him. Given time, perhaps their relationship would have matured into something significant. For now the only thing she could do was put him out of her mind.

As soon as she got home she confronted Ravi with what she had learned.

'Who told you?

'Mohan.'

'It's none of his business, as far as I can see.'

'But it certainly is my business and I am glad that somebody thought it necessary to tell me even if you didn't.'

'I can't understand what he thinks gives him the right to interfere in my life.'

Ann said, trying to keep her temper, 'Why don't you answer my question instead of harping on things that are beside the point? Is what I heard true? How I heard it is immaterial.'

'It's not true, strictly speaking.'

'What if you don't speak strictly?'

'I haven't got any definite plans.'

'This sounds like the replay of a conversation we have already had. Are you going to tell me without endless cross-questioning what exactly the deal is? Either that or you will have to tell me that it's none of my business, in which case I won't ask you again.'

'You are as usual making a melodrama out of it. It's nothing definite, I tell you. I have only sent out some feelers, that's all.'

'Why don't you ever tell me anything, discuss anything with me? Don't you feel like sharing your thoughts, your plans with me? What does a marriage mean to you? Just two people living under the same roof for the sake of convenience?'

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'Wait a minute now, don't fly off the handle.'

'Ravi, can you give me one satisfactory reason why you didn't—why you still haven't—talked to me about this thing? Were you planning to present me with a decision already taken?'

Suddenly he said, quite calmly, 'Yes, if you want to know the truth.'

Ann felt cold all over. There was a weight in the pit of her stomach. She said, equally calmly, 'And did you expect me to simply fall in with your plans?'

'That would have been up to you. I can only decide for myself. I can't force my decision on you, can I?'

Ann was aghast. 'Let me get this straight. You take a decision, without even consulting me, to go to the U.S. You then leave me the choice of following you or staying here. Which means either that you have the supreme egotism to take it for granted that I have no recourse but to accompany you, or that you don't really care. Is that about the size of it?'

He shrugged. 'You are drawing the conclusions, not I.'

'But you can't deny that they are logical. Now you had better tell me which of the alternatives you prefer.'

'I don't have to do anything.'

'Will you answer me properly, for once?'

'Don't shout, the maid is still here.'

'I'll shout if I feel like it. I don't care who hears me. You treat me as though I mean nothing to you. Don't I even have the right to protest about it? Where are you going?'

'You are getting hysterical. Nothing can be gained by our continuing this conversation.'

He went to the front door.

'For the last time, are you going to discuss this properly with me?'

'No.'

'Ravi, if you walk out that door now, you need not come back. Ever.'

He didn't even look back at her. She went to the door at a run, shot the bolts with decisive loud clicks, like a fullstop to something. Then she threw herself on the living room divan and burst into uncontrollable sobs.

She thought, the failure of a marriage is like fire or an accident. It always happens to other people. But when it does happen to

you, it is never a complete surprise, you find you always knew that you were as susceptible as anyone else, and marriage after all is only a breakable contract.

She asked herself what she grieved for. Was it the endless self-interrogation which was bound to follow? When did it start? Where did it go wrong? When did it cease to be a mass of petty disagreements and become a serious rift? At which exact point? Where did I fail? Did I fail?

Or was it the humiliation? There was that, of course. Ravi had, without even a backward glance, walked out on her. It stung. Had she changed in such a short time from a woman he admired and loved, to one he couldn't stand? Or had he married not her but a false image of her that he had built up in his mind and then discovered his error? Or was a wife who seemed appropriate in one setting inadequate in another?

With what hopes and dreams she had embarked on this journey, and with what a careless stroke Ravi had reduced them to ashes. All that emotional energy wasted. She understood what Mohini had felt. For nine months, she had said, you carry and nurture the child and then suddenly it's not there any longer, and life is suddenly empty. As she dried her tears and made herself go about the tasks of getting dinner and giving Rahul his bath and telling him a story, she knew that she was grieving for something else also. Marriage above all else is someone's constant presence in your life. She already felt an aching loneliness when she thought that there was no longer going to be anybody to whom she could say, Hey, do you know what I saw today? Or that tonight and every night her seeking hand would not find his warm body which would turn to her and answer her touch. She felt a shudder go through to the very core of her being. It is like a death. Final. Inevitable. Irreversible. You have to accept it and live with it. That's all there is to it.

During the next few days as she went about her daily routine, Ann wondered whether Ravi felt any of the anguish she experienced. Or had he—an alternative which was painful to contemplate—come to a point where he was relieved to be given an excuse to leave her? Could she have been so impervious that she had not had any inkling of his feelings?

One day when she came back from school the maid told her that Saheb had come during her absence and taken away a couple of suitcases full of his things.

'I see.' So, did he too treat this as the final break? But why didn't he want to see her, talk things over? Did he think that she would be possessive?

'Bai, have you had a quarrel?'

'Yes.'

'Why don't you go to see him?'

'If he doesn't want to see me, I am not going to see him.'

'But how long will you go on like this?'

'As long as necessary.'

'You have nobody here. Will you go back to your mother?'

Ann smiled. She said, 'No, I will not go back to my mother.' She could not hope to make this simple woman understand the situation.

Some of Ann's questions were answered when her mother-in-law came to see her. Although she did come to see Rahul occasionally, she was usually accompanied by Uma or one of Mahesh's children. Ann was therefore surprised to see her alone.

Without any preamble Mrs Gogte said, 'I don't know what's going on between you and Ravi, but he has sent me with a message.'

'Why couldn't he bring his own message?'

'He says you have thrown him out of the house and would probably not be prepared to see him. He may have behaved badly, but don't you think throwing him out of his own house is going too far?'

Ann almost smiled at the mixture of disapproval and the wariness which these days she displayed in her dealings with Ann.

She said, 'I didn't throw him out. He walked out.'

'Did he?'

'Well, he walked out and I told him not to bother to come back. What's the message?'

'He is going to America.'

'That doesn't surprise me.'

'He wants you to go with him.'

Ann was so taken aback that she couldn't find any words. She couldn't make up her mind whether it was more insulting or less that he was treating what had happened as just a minor spat which could be patched up through an emissary.

Mrs Gogte said, 'Are you going?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'I don't like to be forced to do things.'

'How is he forcing you?'

'When he takes a decision about something that affects me, affects our life together, without even consulting me, and then expects me to fall into line, he is trying to force me.'

'I suppose it was wrong of him not to have talked it over with you, but he was afraid that you might not agree with him.'

'That's all the more reason why he should have talked it over.'

'What shall I tell him?'

'That I am not going with him.'

'You are letting your pride dictate your decision.'

'Why shouldn't I? I suppose being an Indian, you think that the husband is free to do anything he pleases, treat his wife in any manner he wishes, but she must still do his bidding because he is her lord and master.'

'No, I don't think that at all,' Mrs Gogte said quietly. 'But I think that it is easier to break relationships than to build them. You are being too hard on Ravi. He tends to be impetuous, but he is not cruel. He didn't mean to hurt you.'

'I am sorry, Aai, but that's not enough. You don't know exactly what has happened. It's not just one particular incident. It's his whole attitude, his refusal to treat me as an equal partner, which he has demonstrated again and again. I cannot come to terms with that.'

'It's still something you can discuss.'

Now Ann was angry. 'Then why didn't he come and discuss it with me? Why is he hiding behind you and letting you fight his battle? And talking of you fighting his battle, are you actually trying to persuade me to go with him? I can't believe this. Do you approve of his going?'

'My approval doesn't enter into it, Ann. He is doing what he wants to do. I don't want him to go, but ultimately I want him to be happy.' Her voice was sad, without its usual hardness and for the first time since Ann had known her, she seemed defenceless, vulnerable. Ann felt sorry for her.

'What does Appa say?'

'What can he say? You know what he feels about it. He is

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angry and hurt, but is too proud to show it. They had bitter arguments, but once he saw that he could not keep Ravi from going, he stopped talking to him. For the past few days he has been coming home late and eating after everyone else has had their meal, just so he wouldn't have to sit and eat with Ravi.'

When her mother-in-law left, Ann realized that this must have been the longest conversation they had ever had, and although they obviously did not see eye-to-eye about a lot of things, she felt that a real communication had been established between them

She felt that when this conversation was repeated to him, as she was sure it would be, Ravi might come to see her. She did not see what could be accomplished now by their seeing each other, but she still somehow hoped for it.

It was not Ravi but her mother-in-law who finally came.

She said, 'Ravi went to Bombay yesterday. His flight is the day after tomorrow.'

'Good.'

'He said you can join him later.'

Ann didn't say anything.

'Will you go to him if he sends for you?'

'No.'

'What are you going to do?'

Ann smiled slightly to realize that both her mother-in-law and Laxmibai had the same reaction. She felt like saying, what do you mean what will I do? I will continue doing the same things I have always done. Keep house, look after Rahul, go to work. Why does the question of what I will do arise just because Ravi is not here to share my life?

She said, 'For the time being stay on here. I have my job, Rahul has his school. We should probably move to a smaller place, a flat, but I like this house and my garden, and the neighbourhood.'

'Eventually, will you go to Ravi?'

'I may go back but not to him. We're through. For good.'

This time her mother-in-law seemed to accept it. She did not protest or try to reason with her.

She only said, 'Won't you be lonely here by yourself?'

'No I have enough to do. And there's Rahul. Even though he is a pest sometimes, he is also company.'

'You can come and stay with us.'

'Thank you, Aai. I appreciate your offer, but I would really rather be independent.'

'Will you bring Rahul to see us now and then?'

'Of course. And I hope you will feel free to come and see us any time you want to.'

Mrs Gogte seemed to need an effort to make herself get up. Something—perhaps her son's invisible presence there—was making her reluctant to leave. But finally she got up. At the door she stopped for a moment and said. 'Do you need any money?

'No, I have enough.'

'If you need any, all you have to do is ask.'

'Thank you.'

Then she was gone. Ann had the feeling that there was something left unsaid something more her mother-in-law wanted to convey. What it was she could not guess. Perhaps in the days to come, they would become better friends. Mrs Gogte was essentially a cold woman. She was not capable of inspiring affection. Ann could imagine, between them, a relationship of mutual respect, but not much more. But she would be content with that.

Then it was late afternoon and, as she did every day, Ann took Rahul for a walk up the hill. Although he was quite companionable, and his prattle filled the silence, she was lonely. It would take a lot of planning and discipline to fill the hours with meaningful activity. As they stood at the top of the hill and Ann pointed out the usual landmarks to him—the tall dome of the Krishna temple, the spires of the old market, the sprawling buildings of the Sangampur College, the Kamla Nehru Park, and, of course, their house—she thought that she would like to give some time to exploring the city in the way she wanted.

She was thinking of a day when she and Ravi had agreed to meet at Sangam Coffee House. She had got there first and found that there were no empty tables. She had asked a woman if she might share her table. *The woman was Dutch, and had been travelling around. She ecstatically described Hardwar and Badrinath and Benares. When Ann asked her whether she was in India for a long visit she had said, with dreamy eyes, 'Oh, I am going to stay here forever. I have found my spiritual home.'*

Ravi had later censured Ann. 'Even if you had to share her

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table, you didn't have to get into a conversation with her. She was so disreputable looking, dressed in dirty clothes, obviously a drug addict or a nut to talk that way. You mustn't go out of your way to associate with people of that sort.'

Ann had envied the woman, not for her obsessively romantic love for India, but because she had had the freedom to wander about at will and was not accountable to anybody.

She thought now, 'It was a mistake for me to have come here as a married woman. Marriage gave me responsibilities, status, a locale, all of which meant restrictions. But now I am untrammelled, free to follow my own inclinations. During the holidays I will take Rahul and travel the length and breadth of this country, see its mountains and its temples and its rivers and its cities, meet and talk to people, open myself to the widest range of experience.'

She felt as though, for the past few years, she had been in a limbo. She was now filled with the excitement of having just arrived in this strange and beautiful land.

Ann is an idealistic and rather unconventional American girl who comes to India after her marriage to an Indian. Ann's stormy relationship with her husband and his family, her attempts to make new friends, her ambivalent attitude towards the Indian way of life, makes absorbing reading.

Add to this Jai Nimbkar's easy style, her sharp observations of life in a middle-class Indian family, her ability to capture the subtle nuances of interpersonal relationships and to breathe life into her characters so that they remain firmly rooted in the social reality around them.

Cover: detail from *Price-rise in Danda Village*,
a painting by Bithi Deb Gupta
Cover design: Vasant Pradhan

